HEART of the SUNSET

REX BEACH

Heart of the Sunset

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HEART OF THE SUNSET

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I

THE WATER-HOLE

A FITFUL breeze played among the mesquite bushes. The naked earth, where it showed between the clumps of grass, was baked plaster hard. It burned like hot slag, and except for a panting lizard here and there, or a dust-gray jack-rabbit, startled from its covert, nothing animate stirred upon its face. High and motionless in the blinding sky a buzzard poised; long-tailed Mexican crows among the thorny branches creaked and whistled, choked and rattled, snored and grunted; a dove mourned inconsolably, and out of the air issued metallic insect cries—the direction whence they came as unascertainable as their source was hidden.

Although the sun was half-way down the west, its glare remained untempered, and the tantalizing shade of the sparse mesquite was more of a trial than a comfort to the lone woman who, refusing its deceitful invitation, plodded steadily over the waste. Stop, indeed, she dared not. In spite of her fatigue, regardless of the torture from feet and limbs unused to walking, she must, as she constantly assured herself, keep going until strength failed. So far, fortunately, she had kept her head, and she retained sufficient reason to deny the fanciful apprehensions which clamored for audience. If she once allowed herself to become panicky, she knew, she would fare worse—far worse—and now, if ever, she needed all her faculties. Somewhere to the northward, perhaps a mile, perhaps a league distant, lay the water-hole.

But the country was of a deadly and a deceitful sameness, devoid of landmarks and lacking well-defined watercourses. The unending mesquite with its first spring foliage resembled a limitless peach-orchard sown by some careless and unbelievably prodigal hand. Out of these false acres occasional knolls and low stony hills lifted themselves so that one came, now and then, to vantage-points where the eye leaped for great distances across imperceptible valleys to horizons so far away that the scattered tree-clumps were blended into an unbroken carpet of green. To the woman these outlooks were unutterably depressing, merely serving to reveal the vastness of the desolation about her.

At the crest of such a rise she paused and studied the country carefully, but without avail. She felt dizzily for the desert bag swung from her shoulder, only to find it flat and dry; the galvanized mouthpiece burned her fingers. With a little shock she remembered that she had done this very thing several times before, and her repeated forgetting frightened her, since it seemed to show that her mind had been slightly unbalanced by the heat. That perhaps explained why the distant horizon swam and wavered so.

In all probability a man situated as she was would have spoken aloud, in an endeavor to steady himself; but this woman did nothing of the sort. Seating herself in the densest shade she could find—it was really no shade at all—she closed her eyes and relaxed—no easy thing to do in such a stifling temperature and when her throat was aching with drought.

At length she opened her eyes again, only to find that she could make out nothing familiar. Undoubtedly she was lost; the water-hole might be anywhere. She listened tensely, and the very air seemed to listen with her; the leaves hushed their faint whisperings; a near-by cactus held its forty fleshy ears alert, while others more distant poised in the same harkening attitude. It seemed to the woman that a thousand ears were straining with hers, yet no sound came save only the monotonous crescendo and diminuendo of those locust-cries coming out of nowhere and retreating into the voids. At last, as if satisfied, the leaves began to whisper softly again.

Away to her left lay the yellow flood of the Rio Grande, but the woman, though tempted to swing in that direction, knew better than to yield. At least twenty miles of barrens lay between, and she told herself that she could never cover such a distance. No, the water-hole was nearer; it must be close at hand. If she could only think a little more clearly, she could locate it. Once more she tried, as she had tried many times before, to recall the exact point where she had shot her horse, and to map in her mind's eye the foot-weary course she had traveled from that point onward.

Desert travel was nothing new to her, thirst and fatigue were old acquaintances, yet she could not help wondering if, in spite of her training, in spite of that inborn sense of direction which she had prided herself upon sharing with the wild creatures, she were fated to become a victim of the chaparral. The possibility was remote; death at this moment seemed as far off as ever—if anything it was too far off. No, she would find the water-hole somehow; or the unexpected would happen, as it always did when one was in dire straits. She was too young and too strong to die yet. Death was not so easily won as this.

Rising, she readjusted the strap of the empty water-bag over her shoulder and the loose cartridge-belt at her hip, then set her dusty feet down the slope.

Day died lingeringly. The sun gradually lost its cruelty, but a partial relief from the heat merely emphasized the traveler's thirst and muscular distress. Onward she plodded, using her eyes as carefully as she knew how. She watched the evening flight of the doves, thinking to guide herself by their course, but she was not shrewd enough to read the signs correctly. The tracks she found were old, for the most part, and they led in no particular direction, nowhere uniting into anything like a trail. She wondered if she could bring herself to drink the blood of a jack-rabbit, and if it would quench her thirst. But the thought was repellent, and, besides, she was not a good shot with a revolver. Nor did the cactus offer any relief, since it was only just coming into bloom, and as yet bore no fruit.

The sun had grown red and huge when at last in the hard-baked dirt she discovered fresh hoof-prints. These seemed to lead along the line in which she was traveling, and she followed them gladly, encouraged when they were joined by others, for, although they meandered aimlessly, they formed something more like a trail than anything she had as yet seen. Guessing at their general direction, she hurried on, coming finally into a region where the soil was shallow and scarcely served to cover the rocky substratum. A low bluff rose on her left, and along its crest scattered Spanish daggers were raggedly silhouetted against the sky.

She was in a well-defined path now; she tried to run, but her legs were heavy; she stumbled a great deal, and her breath made strange, distressing sounds as it issued from her open lips. Rounding the steep shoulder of the ridge, she hastened down a declivity into a knot of scrub-oaks and ebony-trees, then halted, staring ahead of her.

The nakedness of the stony arroyo, the gnarled and stunted thickets, were softened by the magic of twilight; the air had suddenly cooled; overhead the empty, flawless sky was deepening swiftly from blue to purple; the chaparral had awakened and echoed now to the sounds of life. Nestling in a shallow, flinty bowl was a pool of water, and on its brink a little fire was burning.

It was a tiny fire, overhung with a blackened pot; the odor of greasewood and mesquite smoke was sharp. A man, rising swiftly to his feet at the first sound, was staring at the new-comer; he was as alert as any wild thing. But the woman scarcely heeded him. She staggered directly toward the pond, seeing nothing after the first glance except the water. She would have flung herself full length upon the edge, but the man stepped forward and stayed her, then placed a tin cup in her hand. She mumbled something in answer to his greeting and the hoarse, raven-like croak in her voice startled her; then she drank, with trembling eagerness, drenching the front of her dress. The water was warm, but it was clean and delicious.

"Easy now. Take your time," said the man, as he refilled the cup. "It won't give out."

She knelt and wet her face and neck; the sensation was so grateful that she was tempted to fling herself bodily into the pool. The man was still talking, but she took no heed of what he said. Then at last she sank back, her feet curled under her, her body sagging, her head drooping. She felt the stranger's hands beneath her arms, felt herself lifted to a more comfortable position. Without asking permission, the stranger unlaced first one, then the other of her dusty boots, seeming not to notice her weak attempt at resistance. Once he had placed her bare feet in the water, she forgot her resentment in the intense relief.

The man left her seated in a collapsed, semi-conscious state, and went back to his fire. For the time she was too tired to do more than refill the drinking-cup occasionally, or to wet her face and arms, but as her pores drank greedily her exhaustion lessened and her vitality returned.

It was dark when for the first time she turned her head toward the camp-fire and stared curiously at the figure there. The appetizing odor of broiling bacon had drawn her attention, and as if no move went unnoticed the man said, without lifting his eyes:

"Let 'em soak! Supper 'll be ready directly. How 'd you like your eggs—if we had any?"

Evidently he expected no reply, for after a chuckle he began to whistle softly, in a peculiarly clear and liquid tone, almost like some bird-call. He had spoken with an unmistakable Texas drawl; the woman put him down at once for a cowboy. She settled her back against a boulder and rested.

The pool had become black and mysterious, the sky was studded with stars when he called her, and she laboriously drew on her stockings and boots. Well back from the fire he had arranged a seat for her, using a saddle-blanket for a covering, and upon this she lowered herself stiffly. As she did so she took fuller notice of the man, and found his appearance reassuring.

"I suppose you wonder how I—happen to be here," she said.

"Now don't talk 'til you're rested, miss. This coffee is strong enough to walk on its hands, and I reckon about two cups of it 'll rastle you into shape." As she raised the tin mug to her lips he waved a hand and smiled. "Drink hearty!" He set a plate of bread and bacon in her lap, then opened a glass jar of jam. "Here's the *dulces*. I've got a sort of sweet tooth in my head. I reckon you'll have to make out with this, 'cause I rode in too late to rustle any fresh meat, and the delivery-wagon won't be 'round before morning." So saying, he withdrew to the fire.

The woman ate and drank slowly. She was too tired to be hungry, and meanwhile the young man squatted upon his heels and watched her through the smoke from a husk cigarette. It was perhaps fortunate for her peace of mind that she could not correctly interpret his expression, for had she been able to do so she would have realized something of the turmoil into which her presence had thrown him. He was accustomed to meeting men in unexpected places—even in the desert's isolation—but to have a night camp in the chaparral invaded by a young and unescorted woman, to have a foot-sore goddess stumble out of the dark and collapse into his arms, was a unique experience and one calculated to disturb a person of his solitary habits.

"Have you had your supper?" she finally inquired.

"Who, me? Oh, I'll eat with the help." He smiled, and when his flashing teeth showed white against his leathery tan the woman decided he was not at all bad-looking. He was very tall and quite lean, with the long legs of a horseman—this latter feature accentuated by his high-heeled boots and by the short canvas cowboy coat that reached only to his cartridge-belt. His features she could not well make out, for the fire was little more than a bed of coals, and he fed it. Indian-like, with a twig or two at a time.

"I beg your pardon. I'm selfish." She extended her cup and plate as an invitation for him to share their contents. "Please eat with me."

But he refused. "I ain't hungry," he affirmed. "Honest!"

Accustomed as she was to the diffidence of ranch-hands, she refrained from urging him, and proceeded with her repast. When she had finished she lay back and watched him as he ate sparingly.

"My horse fell crossing the Arroyo Grande," she announced, abruptly. "He broke a leg, and I had to shoot him."

"Is there any water in the Grande?" asked the man.

"No. They told me there was plenty. I knew of this *charco*, so I made for it."

"Who told you there was water in the arroyo?"

"Those Mexicans at the little-goat ranch."

"Balli. So you walked in from Arroyo Grande. Lord! It's a good ten miles straightaway, and I reckon you came crooked. Eh?"

"Yes. And it was very hot. I was never here but once, and—the country looks different when you're afoot."

"It certainly does," the man nodded. Then he continued, musingly: "No water there, eh? I figured there might be a little." The fact appeared to please him, for he nodded again as he went on with his meal. "Not much rain down here, I reckon."

"Very little. Where are you from?"

"Me? Hebbronville. My name is Law."

Evidently, thought the woman, this fellow belonged to the East outfit, or some of the other big cattle-ranches in the Hebbronville district. Probably he was a range boss or a foreman. After a time she said, "I suppose the nearest ranch is that Balli place?"

"Yes'm."

"I'd like to borrow your horse."

Mr. Law stared into his plate. "Well, miss, I'm afraid—"

She added, hastily, "I'll send you a fresh one by Balli's boy in the morning."

He looked up at her from under the brim of his hat. "D'you reckon you could find that goat-ranch by starlight, miss?"

The woman was silent.

"'Ain't you just about caught up on traveling, for one day?" he asked. "I reckon you need a good rest about as much as anybody I ever saw. You can have my blanket, you know."

The prospect was unwelcome, yet she reluctantly agreed. "Perhaps— Then in the morning—"

Law shook his head. "I can't loan you my horse, miss. I've got to stay right here."

"But Balli's boy could bring him back."

"I got to meet a man."

"Here?"

"Yes'm."

"When will he come?"

"He'd ought to be here at early dark to-morrow evening." Heedless of her dismay, he continued, "Yes'm, about sundown."

"But—I can't stay here. I'll ride to Balli's and have your horse back by afternoon."

"My man might come earlier than I expect," Mr. Law persisted.

"Really, I can't see what difference it would make. It wouldn't interfere with your appointment to let me—"

Law smiled slowly, and, setting his plate aside, selected a fresh cigarette; then as he reached for a coal he explained:

"I haven't got what you'd exactly call an appointment. This feller I'm expectin' is a Mexican, and day before yesterday he killed a man over in Jim Wells County. They got me by 'phone at Hebbronville and told me he'd left. He's headin' for the border, and he's due here about sundown, now that Arroyo Grande's dry. I was aimin' to let you ride his horse."

"Then—you're an officer?"

"Yes'm. Ranger. So you see I can't help you to get home till my man comes. Do you live around here?" The speaker looked up inquiringly, and after an instant's hesitation the woman said, quietly:

"I am Mrs. Austin." She was grateful for the gloom that hid her face. "I rode out this way to examine a tract of grazing-land."

It seemed fully a minute before the Ranger answered; then he said, in a casual tone, "I reckon Las Palmas is quite a ranch, ma'am."

"Yes. But we need more pasture."

"I know your La Feria ranch, too. I was with General Castro when we had that fight near there."

"You were a Maderista?"

"Yes'm. Machine-gun man. That's a fine country over there. Seems like God Almighty got mixed and put the Mexicans on the wrong side of the Rio Grande. But I reckon you haven't seen much of La Feria since the last revolution broke out."

"No. We have tried to remain neutral, but—" Again she hesitated. "Mr. Austin has enemies. Fortunately both sides have spared La Feria."

Law shrugged his broad shoulders. "Oh, well, the revolution isn't over! A ranch in Mexico is my idea of a bad investment." He rose and, taking his blanket, sought a favorable spot upon which to spread it. Then he helped Mrs. Austin to her feet—her muscles had stiffened until she could barely stand—after which he fetched his saddle for a pillow. He made no apologies for his meager hospitality, nor did his guest expect any.

When he had staked out his horse for the night he returned to find the woman rolled snugly in her covering, as in a cocoon. The dying embers flickered into flame and lit her hair redly. She had laid off her felt Stetson, and one loosened braid lay over her hard pillow. Thinking her asleep, Law stood motionless, making no attempt to hide his expression of wonderment until, unexpectedly, she spoke.

"What will you do with me when your Mexican comes?" she said.

"Well, ma'am, I reckon I'll hide you out in the brush till I tame him. I hope you sleep well."

"Thank you. I'm used to the open."

He nodded as if he well knew that she was; then, shaking out his slicker, turned away.

As he lay staring up through the thorny mesquite branches that roofed him inadequately from the dew he marveled mightily. A bright, steady-burning star peeped through the leaves at him, and as he watched it he remembered that this red-haired woman with the still, white face was known far and wide through the lower valley as "The Lone Star." Well, he mused, the name fitted her; she was, if reports were true, quite as mysterious, quite as cold and fixed and unapproachable, as the title implied. Knowledge of her identity had come as a shock, for Law knew something of her history, and to find her suing for his protection was quite thrilling. Tales of her pale beauty were common and not tame, but she was all and more than she had been described. And yet why had no one told him she was so young? This woman's youth and attractiveness amazed him; he felt that he had made a startling discovery. Was she so cold, after all, or was she merely reserved? Red hair above a pure white face; a woman's form wrapped in his blanket; ripe red lips caressing the rim of his mean drinking-cup! Those were things to think about. Those were pictures for a lonely man.

She had not been too proud and cold to let him help her. In her fatigue she had allowed him to lift her and to make her more comfortable. Hot against his palms—palms unaccustomed to the touch of woman's flesh—he felt the contact of her naked feet, as at the moment when he had placed them in the cooling water. Her feeble resistance had only called attention to her sex—to the slim whiteness of her ankles beneath her short riding-skirt.

Following his first amazement at beholding her had come a fantastic explanation of her presence—for a moment or two it had seemed as if the fates had taken heed of his yearnings and had sent her to him out of the dusk

—wild fancies, like these, bother men who are much alone. Of course he had not dreamed that she was the mistress of Las Palmas. That altered matters, and yet—they were to spend a long idle day together. If the Mexican did not come, another night like this would follow, and she was virtually his prisoner. Perhaps, after all—

Dave Law stirred nervously and sighed.

"Don't this beat hell?" he murmured.

III

THE AMBUSH

ALAIRE AUSTIN slept badly. The day's hardships had left their traces. The toxins of fatigue not only poisoned her muscles with aches and pains, but drugged her brain and rendered the night a long succession of tortures during which she experienced for a second time the agonies of thirst and fatigue and despair. Extreme physical ordeals, like profound emotional upheavals, leave imprints upon the brain, and while the body may recover quickly, it often requires considerable time to rest exhausted nerves. The finer the nervous organism, the slower is the process of recuperation. Like most normal women, Alaire had a surprising amount of endurance, both nervous and muscular, but, having drawn heavily against her reserve force, she paid the penalty. During the early hours of the night she slept hardly at all, and as soon as her bodily discomfort began to decrease her mind became unruly. Twice she rose and limped to the water-hole for a drink, and it was not until nearly dawn that she dropped off into complete unconsciousness. She was awakened by a sunbeam which pierced her leafy shelter and with hot touch explored her upturned face.

It was still early; the sun had just cleared the valley's rim and the ground was damp with dew. Somewhere near by an unfamiliar bird was sweetly trilling. Alaire listened dreamily until the bird-carol changed to the air of a familiar cowboy song, then she sat up, queerly startled.

David Law was watering his horse, grooming the animal meanwhile with a burlap cloth. Such attention was unusual in a stock country where horses run wild, but this horse, Mrs. Austin saw, justified unusual care. It was a beautiful blood-bay mare, and as the woman looked it lifted its head, then with wet, trembling muzzle caressed its owner's cheek. Undoubtedly this attention was meant for a kiss, and was as daintily conferred as any woman's favor. It brought a reward in a lump of sugar. There followed an exhibition of equine delight; the mare's lips twitched, her nose wrinkled ludicrously, she stretched her neck and tossed her head as the sweetness tickled her palate. Even the nervous switching of her tail was eloquent of pleasure. Meanwhile the owner showed his white teeth in a smile.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Austin.

Law lifted his hat in a graceful salute as he approached around the edge of the pool, his spurs jingling musically. The mare followed.

"You have a fine horse, there."

"Yes'm. Her and me get along all right. I hope we didn't wake you, ma'am."

"No. I was too tired to sleep well."

"Of course. I heard you stirring about during the night." Law paused, and the mare, with sharp ears cocked forward, looked over his shoulder inquisitively. "Tell the lady good morning, Bessie Belle," he directed. The animal flung its head high, then stepped forward and, stretching its neck, sniffed doubtfully at the visitor.

"What a graceful bow!" Mrs. Austin laughed. "You taught her that, I presume."

"Yes'm! She'd never been to school when I got her; she was plumb ignorant. But she's got all the airs of a fine lady now. Sometimes I go without sugar, but Bessie Belle never does."

"And you with a sweet tooth!"

The Ranger smiled pleasantly. "She's as easy as a rockin'-chair. We're kind of sweethearts. Ain't we, kid?" Again Bessie Belle tossed her head high. "That's 'yes,' with the reverse English," the speaker explained. "Now you just rest yourself, ma'am, and order your breakfast. What 'll it be—quail, dove, or cottontail?"

"Why—whatever you can get."

"That ain't the kind of restaurant we run. Bessie Belle would sure be offended if she understood you. Ever see anybody call a quail?"

"Can it really be done?"

Law's face brightened. "You wait." He led his mare down the arroyo, then returned, and, taking his Winchester from its scabbard, explained: "There's a pair of 'top-knots' on that side-hill waitin' for a drink. Watch 'em run into my lap when I give the distress signal of our secret order." He skirted the water-hole, and seated himself with his heels together and his elbows propped upon his spread knees in the military position for close shooting. From where he sat he commanded an unobstructed view of the thicket's edge. Next he moistened his lips and uttered an indescribable low whistle. At intervals he repeated the call, while the woman looked on with interest. Suddenly out of the grass burst a blue quail, running with wings outstretched and every feather ruffled angrily. It paused, the man's cheeks snuggled against the stock of his gun, and the bark of the thirty-thirty sounded loudly. Mrs. Austin saw that he had shot the little bird's head off. She spoke, but he stilled her with a gesture, threw in a second shell, and repeated his magic call. There was a longer wait this time, but finally the performance was repeated. The marksman rose, picked up the two birds, and came back to the camping-place.

"Kind of a low-down trick when they've just started housekeeping, ain't it?" he smiled.

Mrs. Austin saw that both crested heads had been cleanly severed. "That is quite wonderful," she said. "You must be an unusually good shot."

"Yes'm. You can fool turkeys the same way. Turkeys are easy."

"What do you say to them? What brings them out, all ruffled up?" she asked, curiously.

Law had one of the birds picked by this time. "I tell 'em a snake has got me. I reckon each one thinks the other is in trouble and comes to the rescue. Anyhow, it's a mighty mean trick."

He would not permit her to help with the breakfast, so she lay back enjoying the luxury of her hard bed and watching her host, whose personality, now that she saw him by daylight, had begun to challenge her interest. Of late years she had purposely avoided men, and circumstances had not permitted her to study those few she had been forced to meet; but now that fate had thrown her into the company of this stranger, she permitted some play to her curiosity.

Physically Law was of an admirable make—considerably over six feet in height, with wide shoulders and lean, strong limbs. Although his face was schooled to mask all but the keenest emotions, the deftness of his movements was eloquent, betraying that complete muscular and nervous control which comes from life in the open. A pair of blue-gray, meditative eyes, with a whimsical fashion of wrinkling half-shut when he talked, relieved a countenance that otherwise would have been a trifle grim and somber. The nose was prominent and boldly arched, the ears large and pronounced and standing well away from the head; the mouth was thin-lipped and mobile. Alaire tried to read that bronzed visage, with little success until she closed her eyes and regarded the mental image. Then she found the answer: Law had the face and the head of a hunter. The alert ears, the watchful eyes, the predatory nose were like those of some hunting animal. Yes, that was decidedly the strongest impression he gave. And yet in his face there was nothing animal in a bad sense. Certainly it showed no grossness. The man was wild, untamed, rather than sensual, and despite his careless use of the plains vernacular he seemed to be rather above the average in education and intelligence. At any rate, without being stupidly tongue-tied, he knew enough to remain silent when there was nothing to say, and that was a blessing, for Mrs. Austin herself was not talkative, and idle chatter distressed her.

On the whole, when Alaire had finished her analysis she rather resented the good impression Law had made upon her, for on general principles she chose to dislike and distrust men. Rising, she walked painfully to the pond and made a leisurely toilet.

Breakfast was ready when she returned, and once more the man sat upon his heels and smoked while she ate. Alaire could not catch his eyes upon her, except when he spoke, at which time his gaze was direct and open; yet never did she feel free from his intensest observation.

After a while she remarked: "I'm glad to see a Ranger in this county. There has been a lot of stealing down our way, and the Association men can't seem to stop it. Perhaps you can."

"The Rangers have a reputation in that line," he admitted. "But there is stealing all up and down the border, since the war. You lost any stuff?"

"Yes. Mostly horses."

"Sure! They need horses in Mexico."

"The ranchers have organized. They have formed a sort of vigilance committee in each town, and talk of using bloodhounds."

"Bloodhounds ain't any good, outside of novels. If beef got scarce, them Greasers would steal the dogs and eat 'em." He added, meditatively, "Dog ain't such bad eatin', either."

"Have you tried it?"

Mr. Law nodded. "It was better than some of the army beef we got in the Philippines." Then, in answer to her unspoken inquiry, "Yes'm, I served an enlistment there."

"You—were a private soldier?"

"Yes'm."

Mrs. Austin was incredulous, and yet she could not well express her surprise without too personal an implication. "I can't imagine anybody—that is, a man like you, as a common soldier."

"Well, I wasn't exactly that," he grinned. "No, I was about the most *un*common soldier out there. I had a speakin' acquaintance with most of the guard-houses in the islands before I got through."

"But why did you enlist—a man like you?"

"Why?" He pondered the question. "I was young. I guess I needed the excitement. I have to get about so much or I don't enjoy my food."

"Did you join the Maderistas for excitement?"

"Mostly. Then, too, I believed Panchito Madero was honest and would give the peons land. An honest Mexican is worth fightin' for, anywhere. The *pelados* are still struggling for their land—for that and a chance to live and work and be happy."

Mrs. Austin stirred impatiently. "They are fighting because they are told to fight. There is no *patriotism* in them," said she.

"I think," he said, with grave deliberateness, "the majority feel something big and vague and powerful stirring inside them. They don't know exactly what it is, perhaps, but it is there. Mexico has outgrown her dictators. They have been overthrown by the same causes that brought on the French Revolution."

"The French Revolution!" Alaire leaned forward, eying the speaker with startled intensity. "You don't talk like a—like an enlisted man. What do you know about the French Revolution?"

Reaching for a coal, the Ranger spoke without facing her. "I've read a good bit, ma'am, and I'm a noble listener. I remember good, too. Why, I had a picture of the Bastille once." He pronounced it "Bastilly," and his hearer settled back. "That was some calaboose, now, wasn't it?" A moment later he inquired, ingenuously, "I don't suppose you ever saw that Bastille, did you?"

"No. Only the place where it stood."

"Sho'! You must have traveled right smart for such a young lady." He beamed amiably upon her.

"I was educated abroad, and I only came home—to be married."

Law noted the lifeless way in which she spoke, and he understood. "I'll bet you *hablar* those French and German lingoes like a native," he ventured. "Beats me how a person can do it."

"You speak Spanish, don't you?"

"Oh yes. But I was born in Mexico, as near as I can make out."

"And you probably speak some of the Filipino dialects?"

"Yes'm, a few."

There was something winning about this young man's modesty, and something flattering in his respectful admiration. He seemed, also, to know his place, a fact which was even more in his favor. Undoubtedly he had force and ability; probably his love of adventure and a happy lack of settled purpose had led him to neglect his more commonplace opportunities and sent him first into the army and thence into the Ranger service. The world is full of such, and the frontier is their gathering-place. Mrs. Austin had met a number of men like Law, and to her they seemed to be the true soldiers of fortune—fellows who lived purely for the fun of living, and leavened their days with adventure. They were buoyant souls, for the most part, drifting with the tide, resentful of authority and free from care; meeting each day with enthusiastic expectancy for what it held in store. They were restless and improvident; the world counted them ne'er-do-wells, and yet she knew that at least their hours were full and that their names—some of them—were written large in the distant places. Alaire Austin often told herself that, had she been born a man, such a life as this might have been hers, and she took pleasure in dreaming sometimes of the experience that fate, in such a case, would have brought to her.

Being a woman, however, and being animated at this particular moment by a peculiarly feminine impulse, she felt urged to add her own touch to what nature had roughed out. This man had been denied what she termed an education; therefore she decided to put one in his way.

"Do you like to read?" she asked him.

"Say! It's my favorite form of exercise." Law's blue-gray eyes were expressionless, his face was bland. "Why?"

"I have a great many books at Las Palmas. You might enjoy some of them."

"Now that's nice of you, ma'am. Mebbe I'll look into this cattle-stealin' in your neighborhood, and if I do I'll sure come borrowin'."

"Oh, I'll send you a boxful when I get back," said Alaire, and Dave thanked her humbly.

Later, when he went to move his mare into a shady spot, the Ranger chuckled and slapped his thigh with his hat. "Bessie Belle, we're going to improve our minds," he said, aloud. "We're going to be literary and read *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Alice in Wonderland.* I bet we'll enjoy 'em, eh? But—doggone! She's a nice lady, and your coat is just the same color as her hair."

Where the shade was densest and the breeze played most freely, there Dave fixed a comfortable couch for his guest, and during the heat of the forenoon she dozed.

Asleep she exercised upon him an even more disturbing effect than when awake, for now he could study her beauty deliberately, from the loose pile of warm, red hair to the narrow, tight-laced boots. What he saw was altogether delightful. Her slightly parted lips offered an irresistible attraction—almost an invitation; the heat had lent a feverish flush to her cheeks; Dave could count the slow pulsations of her white throat. He closed his eyes and tried to quell his unruly longings. He was a strong man; adventurous days and nights spent in the open had coarsened the masculine side of his character, perhaps at expense to his finer nature, for it is a human tendency to revert. He was masterful and ruthless; lacking obligations or reponsibilities of any sort, he had been accustomed to take what he wanted; therefore the gaze he fixed upon the sleeping woman betrayed an ardor calculated to deepen the color in her cheeks, had she beheld it.

And yet, strangely enough, Dave realized that his emotions were unaccountably mixed. This woman's distress had, of course, brought a prompt and natural response; but now her implicit confidence in his honor and her utter dependence upon him awoke his deepest chivalry. Then, too, the knowledge that her life was unhappy, indeed tragic, filled him with a sort of wondering pity. As he continued to look at her these feelings grew until finally he turned away his face. With his chin in his hands he stared out somberly into the blinding heat. He had met few women, of late years, and never one quite like this—

never one, for instance. who made him feel so dissatisfied with his own shortcomings.

After a time he rose and withdrew to the shelter of another tree, there to content himself with mental images of his guest.

But one cannot sleep well with a tropic sun in the heavens, and since there was really nothing for her to do until the heat abated, Alaire, when she awoke, obliged the Ranger to amuse her.

Although she was in fact younger than he, married life had matured her, and she treated him therefore like a boy. Law did not object. Mrs. Austin's position in life was such that most men were humble in her presence, and now her superior wisdom seemed to excite the Ranger's liveliest admiration. Only now and then, as if in an unguarded moment, did he appear to forget himself and speak with an authority equaling her own. What he said at such times indicated either a remarkably retentive memory or else an ability to think along original lines too rare among men of his kind to be easily credited.

For instance, during a discussion of the Mexican situation—and of course their talk drifted thither, for at the moment it was the one vitally interesting topic along the border—he excused the barbarous practices of the Mexican soldiers by saying:

"Of course they're cruel, vindictive, treacherous, but after all there are only a hundred and forty generations between us and Adam; only a hundred and forty lifetimes since the Garden of Eden. We civilized peoples are only a lap or two ahead of the uncivilized ones. When you think that it takes ten thousand generations to develop a plant and root out some of its early heredities, you can see that human beings have a long way yet to go before they become perfect. We're creatures of environment, just like plants. Environment has made the Mexican what he is."

Certainly this was an amazing speech to issue from a sun-browned cowboy sitting cross-legged under a mesquite-tree.

From under her hat-brim Alaire Austin eyed the speaker with a curiosity into which there had come a vague hostility. For the moment she was suspicious and piqued, but Law did not appear to notice, and as he talked on her doubts gradually subsided.

"You said, last night, that you were born on the other side?" She inclined her ruddy head to the west.

"Yes'm. My father was a mining man, and he done well over there until he locked horns with the Guadalupes. Old Don Enrique and him had a run-in at the finish, over some land or something. It was when the Don was gobbling all the property in the state, and laying the foundation for his big fortune. You know he had permission from the president to steal all the land he cared to, just like the rest of those local governors had. Well, Guadalupe tried to run my people out."

"Did he succeed?"

"No'm. He killed 'em, but they stayed."

"Not—really?" The listener was shocked. "American citizens, too?"

"Times wasn't much different then than now. There's plenty of good Americans been killed in Mexico and nothing done about it, even in our day. I don't know all the details—never could get 'em, either—for I was away at school; but after I came back from the Philippines the Madero fuss was just brewing, so I went over and joined it. But it didn't last long, and there wasn't enough fighting to suit me. I've been back, off and on, since, and I've burned a good deal of Guadalupe property and swum a good many head of Guadalupe stock."

As the morning progressed Law proved himself an interesting companion, and in spite of the discomforts of the situation the hours slipped past rapidly. Luncheon was a disagreeable meal, eaten while the arroyo baked and the heat devils danced on the hills; but the unpleasantness was of brief duration, and Law always managed to banish boredom. Nor did he seem to waste a thought upon the nature of that grim business which brought him to this place. Quite the contrary, in the afternoon he put his mare through her tricks for Alaire's edification, and gossiped idly of whatever interested his guest.

Then as the sun edged to the west and Mrs. Austin became restless, he saddled Bessie Belle and led her down the gulch into a safer covert.

Returning, he carefully obliterated all traces of the camp. He watered the ashes of the fire, gathered up the tell-tale scraps of paper and fragments of food, and then when the place suited him fell to examining his rifle.

Alaire watched him with interest. "Where shall I go," she asked, "and what shall I do?"

"You just pick out a good cover beyond the water-hole and stay there, ma'am. It may be a long wait, for something may have happened. If so we'll have to lie close. And don't worry yourself none, ma'am; he won't make no trouble."

The afternoon drew to a close. Gradually the blinding white glare of the sun lessened and yellowed, the shadow of the bluffs began to stretch out. The shallow pool lay silent, deserted save for furtive little shapes that darted nervously out of the leaves, or for winged visitors that dropped out of the air.

With the sunset there came the sound of hoofs upon loose stones, branches rustled against breasting bodies, and Mrs. Austin cowered low in her hiding-place. But it was only the advance-guard of a bunch of brush cattle coming to water. They paused at a distance, and nothing except their thirst finally overcame their suspicions. One by one they drifted into sight, drank warily at the remotest edge of the *tanque*, then, alarmed at some imaginary sight or sound, went clattering up the ravine.

Once again the water-hole lay sleeping.

Alaire's retreat was far from comfortable; there was an ants' nest somewhere near her and she thought of moving; but suddenly her breath caught and her heart jumped uncontrollably. She crouched lower, for directly opposite her position, and outlined against the sky where the sharp ridge cut it, was the figure of a mounted man. Rider and horse were silhouetted against the pearl-gray heaven like an equestrian statue. How long they had been there Alaire had no faintest notion. Perhaps it was their coming which had alarmed the cattle. She was conscious that a keen and hostile pair of eyes was searching the coverts surrounding the *charco*.

Then, as silently as it had appeared, the apparition vanished beyond the ridge, and Alaire wondered if the rider had taken alarm. She earnestly hoped so; this breathless vigil was getting on her nerves, and the sight of that threatening figure had set her pulses to throbbing. The rider was on his guard, that was plain; he was armed, too, and probably desperate. The ominous possibilities of this ambush struck her forcibly.

Alaire lay close, as she had been directed, praying that the horseman had been warned; but shortly she heard again the rustle of stiff branches, and out into the opening rode a Mexican. He was astride a wiry gray pony, and in the strong twilight Alaire could see his every feature—the swarthy cheeks, the roving eyes beneath the black felt hat. A carbine lay across his saddle-horn, a *riata* was coiled beside his leg, a cartridge-belt circled his waist. There was something familiar about the fellow, but at the moment Alaire could not determine what it was.

After one swift appraising glance the new-comer rode straight to the verge of the water-hole and dismounted; then he and his horse drank side by side.

It was the moment for a complete and effective surprise, but nothing happened. Why didn't Law act? Alaire bent low, straining eyes and ears, but no command came from the Ranger. After a while the traveler rose to his feet and stretched his limbs. Next he walked to the ashes of the fire and looked down at them, stirring them with his toe. Apparently satisfied, he lit a cigarette.

Could it be that something had gone wrong with the Ranger's plan? Had something happened to him? Alaire was startled by the possibility; this delay was beyond her comprehension.

Then, as if in answer to her perplexity, a second horseman appeared, and the woman realized how simply she had been fooled.

III

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE WATER-HOLE

THE new-comers exchanged a word or two in Spanish, then the second rider flung himself from his saddle and made for the water. He was lying prone and drinking deeply when out of nowhere came a sharp command.

"*Oiga!* Hands up, both of you!"

The first arrival jumped as if a rattlesnake had buzzed at his back, the second leaped to his feet with an oath; they stared in the direction whence the voice had come.

"Drop your gun, *compañero!*" The order was decisive; it was directed at the man who had first appeared, for the other had left his Winchester in its scabbard.

Both Mexicans cried, as if at a cue, "Who speaks?"

"A Ranger."

The fellow Law had addressed let fall his rifle; two pairs of dark hands rose slowly. Then the Ranger went on in Spanish:

"Anto, lower your left hand and unbuckle your belt." Anto did as he was told, his revolver and cartridge-belt dropped to the ground. "And you, *compadre*, do the same. Mind you, the left hand! Now face about and walk to the *charco*, both of you. Good!"

Law stepped into view, his Winchester in the crook of his arm. He emptied the three discarded weapons, then, walking to Anto's horse, he removed the second carbine from beneath the saddle-flap and ejected its shells into his palm.

This done, he addressed the stranger. "Now, friend, who are you, and why are you riding with this fellow?"

"My name is Panfilo Sanchez, *señor*. Before God, I have done nothing." The speaker was tremendously excited.

"Well, Panfilo, that will take some proving," the Ranger muttered.

"What do you say?"

The gist of this statement having been repeated in Spanish, both prisoners burst into clamorous explanation of their presence together. Panfilo, it seemed, had encountered his companion purely by chance, and was horrified now to learn that his newly made friend was wanted by the authorities. In the midst of his incoherent protestations Mrs. Austin appeared.

"He is telling you the truth, Mr. Law," she said, quietly. "He is one of my men."

Both Mexicans looked blank. At sight of the speaker their mouths fell open, and Panfilo ceased his gesticulations.

Mrs. Austin went on: "He is my horse-breaker's cousin. He couldn't have had any part in that murder in Jim Wells County, for he was at Las Palmas when I left."

Panfilo recovered from his amazement, removed his sombrero, and blessed his employer extravagantly; then he turned triumphantly upon his captor. "Behold!" cried he. "There you have the truth. I am an excellent, hard-working man and as honest as God."

"Surely you don't want him," Alaire appealed to Law. "He was probably helping his countryman to escape—but they all do that, you know."

"All right! If he's your man, that's enough," Dave told her. "Now then, boys, it will soon be dark and we'll need some supper before we start. It won't hurt Anto's horse to rest a bit, either. You are under arrest," he added, addressing the latter. "You understand what that means?"

"*Si, señor!*"

"I won't tie you unless—"

"*No, señor!*" Anto understood perfectly, and was grateful.

"Well, then, build a fire, and you, Panfilo, lend a hand. The *señora* will need a cup of tea, for we three have a long ride ahead of us."

No time was lost. Both Mexicans fell to with a will, and in a surprisingly short time water was boiling. When it came Law's turn to eat, Alaire, who was eager to be gone, directed her employee to fetch the Ranger's horse. Panfilo acquiesced readily and buckled on his cartridge-belt and six-shooter. He was about to pick up his rifle, too, but finding Law's eyes inquiringly fixed upon him, he turned with a shrug and disappeared down the arroyo. It was plain that he considered his friendly relations well established and resented the Ranger's suspicion.

"How long has that fellow been working for you?" Law jerked his head in the direction Panfilo had taken.

"Not long. I—don't know much about him," Alaire confessed. Then, as if in answer to his unspoken question, "But I'm sure he's all right."

"Is he looking up range for you?"

"N—no! I left him at the ranch. I don't know how he came to be here, unless— It *is* rather strange!"

Dave shot a swift, interrogatory glance at Panfilo's traveling companion, but Anto's face was stony, his black eyes were fixed upon the fire.

With an abrupt gesture Law flung aside the contents of his cup and strode to Panfilo's horse, which stood dejectedly with reins hanging.

"Where are you—going?" Alaire rose nervously.

It was nearly dark now; only the crests of the ridges were plain against the luminous sky; in the brushy bottom of the arroyo the shadows were deep. Alaire had no wish to be left alone with the prisoner.

With bridle-rein and carbine in his left hand, the Ranger halted, then, stooping for Anto's discarded cartridge-belt, he looped it over his saddle-horn. He vaulted easily into the seat, saying:

"I hid that mare pretty well. Your man may not be able to find her." Then he turned his borrowed horse's head toward the brush.

Anto had squatted motionless until this moment; he had not even turned his eyes; but now, without the slightest warning, he uttered a loud call. It might have served equally well as a summons or as an alarm, but it changed the Ranger's suspicions into certainty. Dave uttered an angry exclamation, then to the startled woman he cried:

"Watch this man! He can't hurt you, for I've got his shells." To his prisoner he said, sharply: "Stay where you are! Don't move!" The next instant he had loped into the brush on the tracks of Panfilo Sanchez, spurring the tired gray pony into vigorous action.

It was an uncomfortable situation in which Alaire now found herself. Law was too suspicious, she murmured to herself; he was needlessly melodramatic; she felt exceedingly ill at ease as the pony's hoof-beats grew fainter. She was not afraid of Anto, having dealt with Mexican *vaqueros* for several years, yet she could not forget that he was a murderer, and she wondered what she was expected to do if he should try to escape. It was absurd to suppose that Panfilo, her own hired man, could be capable of treachery; the mere suspicion was a sort of reflection upon her.

Alaire was startled by hearing other hoof-beats now; their drumming came faint but unmistakable. Yes, there were two horses racing down the arroyo. Anto, the fugitive, rose to his feet and stared into the dusk.

"Sit down!" Alaire ordered, sharply. He obeyed, muttering beneath his breath, but his head was turned as if in an effort to follow the sounds of the pursuit.

Next came the distant rattle of loosened stones—evidently one horse was being urged toward the open high ground—then the peaceful quiet evening was split by the report of Law's thirty-thirty. Another shot followed, and then a third. Both Alaire and her prisoner were on their feet, the woman shaking in every limb, the Mexican straining his eyes into the gloom and listening intently.

Soon there came a further echo of dry earth and gravel dislodged, but whether by Law's horse or by that of Sanchez was uncertain. Perhaps both men had gained the mesa.

It had all happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that Alaire felt she must be dreaming, or that there had been some idiotic mistake. She wondered if the Ranger's sudden charge had not simply frightened Panfilo into a panicky flight, and she tried to put her thoughts into words the Mexican would understand, but his answer was unintelligible. His black scowl, however, was eloquent of uncertainty and apprehension.

Alaire had begun to feel the strain of the situation and was trying to decide what next to do, when David Law came riding out of the twilight. He was astride the gray; behind him at the end of a lariat was Bessie Belle, and her saddle was empty.

Mrs. Austin uttered a sharp cry.

Law dismounted and strode to the prisoner. His face was black with fury; he seemed gigantic in his rage. Without a word he raised his right hand and cuffed the Mexican to his knees. Then he leaped upon him, as a dog might pounce upon a rabbit, rolled him to his face, and twisted the fellow's arms into the small of his back.

Anto cursed, he struggled, but he was like a child in the Ranger's grasp. Law knelt upon him, and with a jerk of his *riata* secured the fellow's wrists; rising, he set the knot with another heave that dragged the prisoner to his knees. Next he booted Anto to his feet.

"By God! I've a notion to bend a gun over your head," Law growled. "Clever little game, wasn't it?"

"Where—? Did you—kill him?" the woman gasped.

Alaire had never beheld such a demoniac expression as Law turned upon her. The man's face was contorted, his eyes were blazing insanely, his chest was heaving, and for an instant he seemed to include her in his anger. Ignoring her inquiry, he went to his mare and ran his shaking hands over her as if in search of an injury; his questing palms covered every inch of glistening hide from forelock to withers, from shoulder to hoof, and under cover of this task he regained in some degree his self-control.

"That *hombre* of yours—didn't look right to me," he said, finally. Laying his cheek against Bessie Belle's neck, as a woman snuggles close to the man of her choice, he addressed the mare: "I reckon nobody is going to steal you, eh? Not if I know it. No, sir; that *hombre* wasn't any good, was he?"

Alaire wet her lips. "Then you—shot him?"

Law laughed grimly, almost mockingly. "Say! He must be a favorite of yours?"

"N—no! I hardly knew the fellow. But—did you?"

"I didn't say I shot him," he told her, gruffly. "I warned him first, and he turned on me—blew smoke in my face. Then he took to the brush, afoot, and—I cut down on him once more to help him along."

"He got away?"

"I reckon so."

"Oh, oh!" Alaire's tone left no doubt of her relief. "He was always a good man—"

"Good? Didn't he steal my horse? Didn't he aim to get me at the first chance and free his *compadre?* That's why he wanted his Winchester. Say! I reckon he—needs killin' about as much as anybody I know."

"I can't understand it." Alaire sat down weakly. "One of my men, too."

"This fellow behaved himself while I was gone, eh?" Law jerked his head in Anto's direction. "I was afraid he—he'd try something. If he had—" Such a possibility, oddly enough, seemed to choke the speaker, and the ferocity of his unfinished threat caused Mrs. Austin to look up at him curiously. There was a moment of silence, then he said, shortly: "Well, we've got a horse apiece now. Let's go."

The stars had thickened and brightened, rounding the night sky into a glittering dome. Anto, the murderer, with his ankles lashed beneath his horse's belly, rode first; next, in a sullen silence, came the Ranger, his chin upon his breast; and in the rear followed Alaire Austin.

In spite of her release from a trying predicament, the woman was scarcely more eager to go home than was the prisoner, for while Anto's trail led to a jail, hers led to Las Palmas, and there was little difference. These last two days in the open had been like a glimpse of freedom; for a time Alaire had almost lost the taste of bitter memories. It had required an effort of will to drug remembrance, but she had succeeded, and had proven her ability to forget. But now—Las Palmas! It meant the usual thing, the same endless battle between her duty and her desire. She was tired of the fight that resulted neither in victory nor defeat; she longed now, more than ever, to give up and let things take their course. Why could not women, as well as men, yield to their inclinations—drift with the current instead of breasting it until they were exhausted? There was David Law, for instance; he was utterly carefree, no duties shackled him. He had his horse, his gun, and his blanket, and they were enough:

Alaire, like him, was young, her mind was eager, her body ripe, and her veins full of fire. Life must be sweet to those who were free and happy.

But the object of her envy was not so completely at peace with himself as she supposed. Even yet his mind was in a black turmoil from his recent anger, and of late, be it said, these spells of temper had given him cause for uneasiness. Then, too, there was a lie upon his lips.

Under the stars, at the break of the arroyo, three hundred yards below the water-hole, a coyote was slinking in a wide circle around the body of Panfilo Sanchez.

IV

AN EVENING AT LAS PALMAS

ALTHOUGH the lower counties of southwest Texas are flat and badly watered, they possess a rich soil. They are favored, too, by a kindly climate, subtropic in its mildness. The days are long and bright and breezy, while night brings a drenching dew that keeps the grasses green. Of late years there have been few of those distressing droughts that gave this part of the state an evil reputation, and there has been a corresponding increase in prosperity. The Rio Grande, jaundiced, erratic as an invalid, wrings its saffron blood from the clay bluffs and gravel cañons of the hill country, but near its estuary winds quietly through a low coastal plain which the very impurities of that blood have richened. Here the river's banks are smothered in thickets of huisache, ebony, mesquite, oak, and alamo.

Railroads, those vitalizing nerve-fibers of commerce, are so scarce along this division of the border that even in this day when we boast, or lament, that we no longer have a frontier, there remain in Texas sections larger than some of our Eastern states which hear the sound of iron wheels only on their boundaries. To travel from Brownsville north along the international line one must, for several hundred miles, avail oneself of horses, mules, or motor-cars, since rail transportation is almost lacking. And on his way the traveler will traverse whole counties where the houses are *jacals*, where English is a foreign tongue, and where peons plow their fields with crooked sticks as did the ancient Egyptians.

That part of the state which lies below the Nueces River was for a time disputed territory, and long after Texans had given their lives to drive the Eagle of Mexico across the Rio Grande much of it remained a forbidden land. Even to-day it is alien. It is a part of our Southland, but a South different to any other that we have. Within it there are no blacks, and yet the whites number but one in twenty. The rest are swarthy, black-haired men who speak the Spanish tongue and whose citizenship is mostly a matter of form.

The stockmen, pushing ahead of the nesters and the tillers of the soil, were the first to invade the lower Rio Grande, and among these "Old Ed" Austin was a pioneer. Out of the unmapped prairie he had hewed a foothold, and there, among surroundings as Mexican as Mexico, he had laid the beginnings of his fortune.

Of "Old Ed's" early life strange stories are told; like the other cattle barons, he was hungry for land and took it where or how he could. There are tales of fertile sections bought for ten cents an acre, tales of Mexican ranchers dispossessed by mortgage, by monte, or by any means that came to hand; stories even of some, more stubborn than the rest, who refused to feed the Austin greed for land, and who remained on their farms to feed the buzzards instead. Those were crude old days; the pioneers who pushed their herds into the far pastures were lawless fellows, ruthless, acquisitive, mastered by the empire-builder's urge for acres and still more acres. They were the Reclaimers, the men who seized and held, and then seized more, concerning themselves little or not at all with the moral law as applicable to both Mexican and white, and leaving it to the second generation to justify their acts, if ever justification were required.

As other ranches grew under the hands of such unregenerate owners, so also under "Old Ed" Austin's management did Las Palmas increase and prosper. The estate took its name from a natural grove of palms in which the house was built; it comprised an expanse of rich riverland backed by miles of range where "Box A" cattle lived and bred. In his later years the old man sold much land, and some he leased; but when he handed Las Palmas to his son, "Young Ed," as a wedding gift, the ranch still remained a property to be proud of, and one that was known far and wide for its size and richness. Leaving his boy to work out of it a fortune for himself and his bride, the father retired to San Antonio, whither the friends and cronies of his early days were drifting. There he settled down and proceeded to finish his allotted span exactly as suited him best. The rancher's ideal of an agreeable old age comprised three important items—to wit, complete leisure, unlimited freedom of speech, and two pints of rye whisky daily. He enjoyed them all impartially, until, about a year before this story opens, he died profanely and comfortably. He had a big funeral, and was sincerely mourned by a coterie of gouty old Indian-fighters.

Las Palmas had changed greatly since Austin, senior, painfully scrawled his slanting signature to the deed. It was a different ranch now to what the old man had known; indeed, it was doubtful if he would have recognized it, for even the house was new.

Alaire had some such thought in mind as she rode up to the gate on the afternoon following her departure from the water-hole, and she felt a thrill of pride at the acres of sprouting corn, the dense green fields of alfalfa so nicely fitted between their fences. They were like clean, green squares of matting spread for the feet of summer.

A Mexican boy came running to care for her horse, a Mexican woman greeted her as she entered the wide, cool hall and went to her room. Alaire had ridden far. Part of the night had been spent at the Balli goat-ranch, the remainder of the journey had been hot and dusty, and even yet she was not wholly recovered from her experience of the outward trip.

The house servants at Las Palmas were, on the whole, well trained, and Mrs. Austin's periodic absences excited no comment; in the present instance, Dolores fixed a bath and laid out clean clothes with no more than a running accompaniment of chatter concerned with household affairs. Dolores, indeed, was superior to the ordinary servant; she was a woman of some managerial ability, and she combined the duties of personal maid with those of housekeeper. She was a great gossip, and possessed such a talent for gaining information that through her husband, Benito, the range boss, she was able to keep her mistress in fairly intimate touch with ranch matters.

Alaire, however, was at this moment in no mood to resume the tiresome details of management; she quickly dismissed her servitor and proceeded to revel in the luxury of a cool bath, after which she took a nap. Later, as she leisurely dressed herself, she acknowledged that it was good to feel the physical comforts of her own house, even though her home-coming gave her no especial joy. She made it a religious practice to dress for dinner, regardless of Ed's presence, though often for weeks at a time she sat in solitary state, presiding over an empty table. Nevertheless, she kept to her custom, for not only did the formality help her to retain her own self-respect, but it had its influence upon the servants. Without companionship one needs to be ever upon guard to retain the nice refinements of gentle breeding, and any one who has exercised authority in savage countries soon learns the importance of leaving unbridged the gulf of color and of class.

But Alaire looked forward to no lonely dinner to-night.

for Ed was at home. It was with a grave preoccupation that she made herself ready to meet him.

Dolores bustled in for a second time and straightway launched herself into a tirade against Juan, the horse-boy.

"Devil take me if there was ever such a shameless fellow," she cried, angrily. "He delights in tormenting me, and—*Dios!*—he is lazier than a snake. Work? Bah! He abhors it. All day long he snaps his revolver and pretends to be a *bandido*, and when he is not risking hell's fire in that way he is whirling his *riata* and jumping through it. Useless capers! He ropes the dog, he ropes the rose-bushes, he ropes fat Victoria, the cook, carrying a huge bowl of hot water to scald the ants' nest. Victoria's stomach is boiled red altogether, and so painful that when she comes near the stove she curses in a way to chill your blood. What does he do this morning but fling his wicked loop over a calf's head and break off one of its little horns. It was terrible; but Señor Austin only laughed and told him he was a fine *vaquero*."

"Has Mr. Austin been here all the time?"

"Yes.'

"Has he—drunk much?"

"Um-m. No more than common. He is on the gallery now with his cocktails."

"He knows I am at home?"

"I told him."

Alaire went on dressing. After a little she asked: "Has Benito finished branding the calves in the south pasture?"

"He finished yesterday and sent the *remuda* to the Six Mile. José Sanchez will have completed the *rodeo* by this afternoon. Benito rode in last night to see you."

"By the way, you know José's cousin, Panfilo?"

"*Si.*"

"Why did he leave Las Palmas?"

Dolores hesitated so long that her mistress turned upon her with a look of sharp inquiry.

"He went to La Feria, *señora*." Then, in a lowered tone: "Mr. Austin ordered it. Suddenly, without warning, he sent him away, though Panfilo did not wish to go. Benito told me all about it."

"Why was he transferred? Come! What ails your tongue, Dolores?"

"Well, I keep my eyes open and my ears, too. I am no fool—" Dolores paused doubtfully.

"Yes, yes!"

Dolores drew closer. "Rosa Morales—you know the girl? Her father works the big pump-engine at the river. Well, he is not above anything, that man; not above selling his own flesh and blood, and the girl is no better. She thinks about nothing except men, and she attends all the *bailes* for miles around, on both sides of the river. Panfilo loved her; he was mad about her. That's why he came here to work."

"They were engaged, were they not?"

"Truly. And Panfilo was jealous of any man who looked at Rosa. Now you can understand why—he was sent away." Dolores's sharp eyes narrowed meaningly. "*Señor* Ed has been riding toward the river every day, lately. Panfilo was furious, so—"

"I see! That is all I care to hear." Alone, Alaire stood motionless for some time, her face fixed, her eyes unseeing; but later, when she met her husband in the dining-room, her greeting was no less civil than usual.

Ed acknowledged his wife's entrance with a careless nod, but did not trouble to remove his hands from his pockets. As he seated himself heavily at the table and with unsteady fingers shook the folds from his napkin, he said:

"You stayed longer than you intended. Um-m—you were gone three days, weren't you?"

"Four days," Alaire told him, realizing with a little inward start how very far apart she and Ed had drifted. She looked at him curiously for an instant, wondering if he really could be her husband, or—if he were not some peculiarly disagreeable stranger.

Ed had been a handsome boy, but maturity had vitiated his good looks. He was growing fat from drink and soft from idleness; his face was too full, his eyes too sluggish; there was an unhealthy redness in his cheeks. In contrast to his wife's semi-formal dress, he was unkempt—unshaven and soiled. He wore spurred boots and a soft shirt; his nails were grimy. When in the city he contrived to garb himself immaculately; he was in fact something of a dandy; but at home he was a sloven, and openly reveled in a freedom of speech and a coarseness of manner that were sad trials to Alaire. His preparations for dinner this evening had been characteristically simple; he had drunk three dry cocktails and flung his sombrero into a corner.

"I've been busy while you were gone," he announced. "Been down to the pump-house every day laying that new intake. It was a nasty job, too. I had Morales barbecue a *cabrito* for my lunch, and it was good, but I'm hungry again." Austin attacked his meal with an enthusiasm strange in him, for of late his appetite had grown as errant as his habits. Ed boasted, in his clubs, that he was an outdoor man, and he was wont to tell his friends that the rough life was the life for him; but as a matter of fact he spent much more time in San Antonio than he did at home, and each of his sojourns at Las Palmas was devoted principally to sobering up from his last visit to the city and to preparing for another. Nor was he always sober even in his own house; Ed was a heavy and a constant drinker at all times. What little exercise he took was upon the back of a horse, and, as no one knew better than his wife, the physical powers he once had were rapidly deteriorating.

By and by he inquired, vaguely: "Let's see. . . . Where did you go this time?"

"I went up to look over that Ygnacio tract."

"Oh yes. How did you find it?"

"Not very promising. It needs a lot of wells."

"I haven't been out that way since I was a boy. Think you'll lease it?"

"I don't know. I must find some place for those La Feria cattle."

Austin shook his head. "Better leave 'em where they are, until the rebels take that country. I stand mighty well with them."

"That's the trouble," Alaire told him. "You stand too well—so well that I want to get my stock out of Federal territory as soon as possible."

Ed shrugged carelessly. "Suit yourself; they're your cows."

The meal went on with a desultory flow of small talk, during which the husband indulged his thirst freely. Alaire told him about the accident to her horse and the unpleasant ordeal she had suffered in the mesquite.

"Lucky you found somebody at the water-hole," Ed commented. "Who was this Ranger? Never heard of the fellow," he commented on the name. "The Rangers are nothing like they used to be."

"This fellow would do credit to any organization." As Alaire described how expeditiously Law had made his arrest and handled his man, her husband showed interest.

"Nicolas Anto, eh?" said he. "Who was his *compañero?*"

"Panfilo Sanchez."

Ed started. "That's strange! They must have met accidentally."

"So they both declared. Why did you let Panfilo go?"

"We didn't need him here, and he was too good a man to lose, so—" Ed found his wife's eyes fixed upon him, and dropped his own. "I knew you were short-handed at La Feria." There was an interval of silence, then Ed exclaimed, testily, "What are you looking at?"

"I wondered what you'd say."

"Eh? Can't I fire a man without a long-winded explanation?" Something in Alaire's expression warned him of her suspicion; therefore he took refuge behind an assumption of anger. "My God! Don't I have a word to say about my own ranch? Just because I've let you run things to suit yourself—"

"Wait! We had our understanding." Alaire's voice was low and vibrant. "It was my payment for living with you, and you know it. You gave me the reins to Las Palmas so that I'd have something to do, something to live for and think about, except—your actions. The ranch has doubled in value, every penny is accounted for, and you have more money to spend on yourself than ever before. You have no reason to complain."

Austin crushed his napkin into a ball and flung it from him; with a scowl he shoved himself back from the table.

"It was an idiotic arrangement, just the same. I agreed because I was sick. Dad thought I was all shot to pieces. But I'm all right now and able to run my own business."

"Nevertheless, it was a bargain, and it will stand. If your father were alive he'd make you live up to it."

"Hell! You talk as if I were a child," shouted her husband; and his plump face was apoplectic with rage. "The title is in my name. How could he make me do anything?"

"Nobody could force you," his wife said, quietly. "You are still enough of a man to keep your word, I believe, so long as I observe my part of our bargain?"

Ed, slightly mollified, agreed. "Of course I am; I never welched. But I won't be treated as an incompetent, and I'm tired of these eternal wrangles and jangles."

"You *have* welched."

"Eh?" Austin frowned belligerently.

"You agreed to go away when you felt your appetite coming on, and you promised to live clean, at least around home."

"Well?"

"Have you done it?"

"Certainly. I never said I'd cut out the booze entirely."

"What about your carousals at Brownsville?"

Austin subsided sullenly. "Other men have got full in Brownsville."

"No doubt. But you made a scandal. You have been seen with—women, in a good many places where we are known."

"Bah! There's nothing to it."

Alaire went on in a lifeless tone that covered the seething emotions within her. "I never inquire into your actions at San Antonio or other large cities, although of course I have ears and I can't help hearing about them; but these border towns are home to us, and people know me. I won't be humiliated more than I am; public pity is—hard enough to bear. I've about reached the breaking-point."

"Indeed?" Austin leaned forward, his eyes inflamed. His tone was raised, heedless of possible eavesdroppers. "Then why don't you end it? Why don't you divorce me? God knows I never see anything of you. You have your part of the house and I have mine; all we share in common is meal-hours, and—and a mail address. You're about as much my wife as Dolores is."

Alaire turned upon him eyes dark with misery. "You know why I don't divorce you. No, Ed, we're going to live out our agreement, and these Brownsville episodes are going to cease." Her lips whitened. "So are your visits to the pumping-station."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You transferred Panfilo because he was growing jealous of you and Rosa."

Ed burst into sudden laughter. "Good Lord! There's no harm in a little flirtation. Rosa's a pretty girl."

His wife uttered a breathless, smothered exclamation; her hands, as they lay on the table-cloth, were tightly clenched. "She's your tenant—almost your servant. What kind of a man are you? Haven't you any decency left?"

"Say! Go easy! I guess I'm no different to most men." Austin's unpleasant laughter had been succeeded by a still more unpleasant scowl. "I have to do *something*. It's dead enough around here—"

"You must stop going there."

"Humph! I notice *you* go where *you* please. Rosa and I never spent a night together in the chaparral—"

"Ed!" Alaire's exclamation was like the snap of a whip. She rose and faced her husband, quivering as if the lash had stung her flesh.

"That went home, eh? Well, I'm no fool! I've seen something of the world, and I've found that women are about like men. I'd like to have a look at this David Law, this gunman, this Handsome Harry who waits at water-holes for ladies in distress." Ed ignored his wife's outflung hand, and continued, mockingly: "I'll bet he's all that's manly and splendid, everything that I'm not."

"You'd—better stop," gasped the woman. "I can't stand everything."

"So? Well, neither can I."

"After—this, I think you'd better go—to San Antonio. Maybe I'll forget before you come back."

To this "Young Ed" agreed quickly enough. "Good!" said he. "That suits me. It's hell around Las Palmas, anyhow, and I'll at least get a little peace at my club." He glowered after his wife as she left the room. Then, still scowling, he lurched out to the gallery where the breeze was blowing, and flung himself into a chair.

V

SOMETHING ABOUT HEREDITY

IT had required but one generation to ripen the fruits of "Old Ed" Austin's lawlessness, and upon his son heredity had played one of her grimmest pranks. The father had had faults, but they were those of his virtues; he had been a strong man, at least, and had "ridden herd" upon his unruly passions with the same thoroughness as over his wild cattle. The result was that he had been universally respected. At first the son seemed destined to be like his father. It was not until "Young Ed" had reached his full manhood that his defects had become recognizable evil tendencies, that his infirmity had developed into a disease. Like sleeping cancers, the Austin vices had lain dormant in him during boyhood; it had required the mutation from youth to manhood, and the alterative effect of marriage, to rouse them; but, once awakened, their ravages had been swift and destructive.

Ed's marriage to Alaire had been inevitable. They had been playmates, and their parents had considered the union a consummation of their own lifelong friendship. Upon her mother's death, Alaire had been sent abroad, and there she remained while "Young Ed" attended an Eastern college. For any child the experience would have been a lonesome one, and through it the motherless Texas girl had grown into an imaginative, sentimental person, living in a make-believe world, peopled, for the most part, with the best-remembered figures of romance and fiction. There were, of course, some few flesh-and-blood heroes among the rest, and of these the finest and the noblest had been "Young Ed" Austin.

When she came home to marry, Alaire was still very much of a child, and she still considered Ed her knight. As for him, he was captivated by this splendid, handsome girl, whom he remembered only as a shy, red-headed little comrade.

Never was a marriage more propitious, never were two young people more happily situated than these two, for they were madly in love, and each had ample means with which to make the most of life.

As Las Palmas had been the elder Austin's wedding-gift to his son, so Alaire's dowry from her father had been La Feria, a grant of lands across the Rio Grande beyond the twenty-league belt by which Mexico fatuously strives to guard her border. And to Las Palmas had come the bride and groom to live, to love, and to rear their children.

But rarely has there been a shorter honeymoon, seldom a swifter awakening. Within six months "Young Ed" had killed his wife's love and had himself become an alcoholic. Others of his father's vices revived, and so multiplied that what few virtues the young man had inherited were soon choked. The change was utterly unforeseen; its cause was rooted too deeply in the past to be remedied. Maturity had marked an epoch with "Young Ed"; marriage had been the mile-post where his whole course veered abruptly.

To the bride the truth had come as a stunning tragedy. She was desperately frightened, too, and lived a nightmare life, the while she tried in every way to check the progress of that disintegration which was eating up her happiness. The wreck of her hopes and glad imaginings left her sick, bewildered, in the face of "the thing that couldn't."

Nor had the effect of this transformation in "Young

Ed" been any less painful to his father. For a time the old man refused to credit it, but finally, when the truth was borne in upon him unmistakably, and he saw that Las Palmas was in a fair way to being ruined through the boy's mismanagement, the old cattleman had risen in his wrath. The ranch had been his pride as Ed had been his joy; to see them both go wrong was more than he could bear. There had been a terrible scene, and a tongue-lashing delivered in the language of early border days. There had followed other visits from Austin, senior, other and even bitterer quarrels; at last, when the girl-wife remained firm in her refusal to divorce her husband, the understanding had been reached by which the management of Las Palmas was placed absolutely in her hands.

Of course, the truth became public, as it always does. This was a new country—only yesterday it had been the frontier, and even yet a frontier code of personal conduct to some extent prevailed. Nevertheless, "Young Ed" Austin's life became a scorn and a hissing among his neighbors. They were not unduly fastidious, these neighbors, and they knew that hot blood requires more than a generation to cool, but everything Ed did outraged them. In trying to show their sympathy for his wife they succeeded in wounding her more deeply, and Alaire withdrew into herself. She became almost a recluse, and fenced herself away not only from the curious, but also from those who really wished to be her friends. In time people remarked that Ed Austin's metamorphosis was no harder to understand than that of his wife.

It was true. She had changed. The alteration reached to the very bone and marrow of her being. At first the general pity had wounded her, then it had offended, and finally angered her. That people should notice her affliction, particularly when she strove so desperately to hide it, seemed the height of insolence.

The management of Las Palmas was almost her only relief. Having sprung from a family of ranchers, the work came easy, and she grew to like it—as well as she could like anything with that ever-present pain in her breast. The property was so large that it gave ample excuse for avoiding the few visitors who came, and the range boss, Benito Gonzales, attended to most of the buying and selling. Callers gradually became rarer; friends dropped away almost entirely. Since Las Palmas employed no white help whatever, it became in time more Mexican than in the days of "Old Ed" Austin's ownership.

In such wise had Alaire fashioned her life, living meanwhile under a sort of truce with her husband.

But Las Palmas had prospered to admiration, and La Feria would have prospered equally had it not been for the armed unrest of the country across the border. No finer stock than the "Box A" was to be found anywhere. The old lean, long-horned cattle had been interbred with white-faced Herefords, and the sleek coats of their progeny were stretched over twice the former weight of beef. Alaire had even experimented with the Brahman strain, importing some huge, hump-backed bulls that set the neighborhood agog. People proclaimed they were sacred oxen and whispered that they were intended for some outlandish pagan rite—Alaire by this time had gained the reputation of being "queer"—while experienced stockmen declared the venture a woman's folly, affirming that buffaloes had never been crossed successfully with domestic cattle. It was rumored that one of these imported animals cost more than a whole herd of Mexican stock, and the ranchers speculated freely as to what "Old Ed" Austin would have said of such extravagance.

It was Blaze Jones, one of the few county residents granted access to Las Palmas, who first acquainted himself with the outcome of Alaire's experiment, and it was he who brought news of it to some visiting stock-buyers at Brownsville.

Blaze was addicted to rhetorical extravagance. His voice was loud; his fancy ran a splendid course.

"Gentlemen," said he, "you-all interest me with your talk about your prize Northern stock; but I claim that the bigger the state the bigger the cattle it raises. That's why old Texas beats the world."

"But it doesn't," some one contradicted.

"It don't, hey? My boy"—Blaze jabbed a rigid finger into the speaker's ribs, as if he expected a ground-squirrel to scuttle forth—"we've got steers in this valley that are damn near the size of the whole state of Rhode Island. If they keep on growin' I doubt if you could fatten one of 'em in Delaware without he'd bulge over into some neighboring commonwealth. It's the God's truth! I was up at Las Palmas last month—"

"Las Palmas!" The name was enough to challenge the buyers' interest.

Blaze nodded. "You-all think you know the stock business. You're all swollen up with cow-knowledge, now, ain't you?" He eyed them from beneath his black eyebrows. "Well, some of our people thought they did, too. They figured they'd inherited all there was to know about live stock, and they grew plumb arrogant over their wisdom. But—pshaw! They didn't know nothing. Miz Austin has bred in that Brayma strain and made steers so big they run four to the dozen. And here's the remarkable thing about 'em—they 'ain't got as many ticks as you gentlemen."

Some of the cattlemen were incredulous, but Blaze maintained his point with emphasis. "It's true. They're a grave disappointment to every kind of parasite."

But Alaire had not confined her efforts to cattle; she had improved the breed of "Box A" horses, too, and hand in hand with this work she had carried on a series of agricultural experiments.

Las Palmas, so people used to say, lay too far up the river to be good farming-land; nevertheless, once the pumping-plant was in, certain parts of the ranch raised nine crops of alfalfa, and corn that stood above a rider's head.

There was no money in "finished" stock; the border was too far from market—that also had long been an accepted truism—yet this woman built silos which she filled with her own excess fodder in scientific proportions, and somehow or other she managed to ship fat beeves direct to the packing-houses and get big prices for them.

These were but a few of her many ventures. She had her hobbies, of course, but, oddly enough, most of them paid or promised to do so. For instance, she had started a grove of paper-shelled pecans, which was soon due to bear; the ranch house and its clump of palms was all but hidden by a forest of strange trees, which were reported to ripen everything from moth-balls to bicycle tires. Blaze Jones was perhaps responsible for this report, for Alaire had shown him several thousand eucalyptus saplings and some ornamental rubber-plants.

"That Miz Austin is a money-makin' piece of furniture," he once told his daughter Paloma. "I'm no mechanical adder—I count mostly on my fingers—but her and me calculated the profits on them eucher—what's-their-name trees?—and it gave me a splittin' headache. She'll be a drug queen, sure."

"Why don't you follow her example?" asked Paloma. "We have plenty of land."

Blaze, in truth, was embarrassed by the size of his holdings, but he shook his head. "No, I'm too old to go rampagin' after new gods. I 'ain't got the imagination to raise anything more complicated than a mortgage; but if I was younger, I'd organize myself up and do away with that Ed Austin. I'd sure help him to an untimely end, and then I'd marry them pecan-groves, and blooded herds, and drug-store orchards. She certainly is a heart-breakin' device, with her red hair and red lips and—"

"*Father!*" Paloma was deeply shocked.

Complete isolation, of course, Alaire had found to be impossible, even though her ranch lay far from the traveled roads and her Mexican guards were not encouraging to visitors. Business inevitably brought her into contact with a considerable number of people, and of these the one she saw most frequently was Judge Ellsworth of Brownsville, her attorney.

It was perhaps a week after Ed had left for San Antonio that Alaire felt the need of Ellsworth's counsel, and sent for him. He responded promptly, as always. Ellsworth was a kindly man of fifty-five, with a forceful chin and a drooping, heavy-lidded eye that could either blaze or twinkle. He was fond of Alaire, and his sympathy, like his understanding, was of that wordless yet comprehensive kind which is most satisfying. Judge Ellsworth knew more than any four men in that part of Texas; information had a way of seeking him out, and his head was stored to repletion with facts of every variety. He was a good lawyer, too, and yet his knowledge of the law comprised but a small part of that mental wealth upon which he prided himself. He knew human nature, and that he considered far more important than law. His mind was like a full granary, and every grain lay where he could put his hand upon it.

He motored out from Brownsville, and, after ridding himself of dust, insisted upon spending the interval before dinner in an inspection of Alaire's latest ranch improvements. He had a fatherly way of walking with his arm about Alaire's shoulders, and although she sometimes suspected that his warmth of good-fellowship was merely a habit cultivated through political necessities, nevertheless it was comforting, and she took it at its face value.

Not until the dinner was over did Ellsworth inquire the reason for his summons.

"It's about La Feria. General Longorio has confiscated my stock," Alaire told him.

Ellsworth started. "Longorio! That's bad."

"Yes. One of my riders just brought the news. I was afraid of this very thing, and so I was preparing to bring the stock over, Still—I never thought they'd actually confiscate it."

"Why shouldn't they?"

Alaire interrogated the speaker silently.

"Hasn't Ed done enough to provoke confiscation?" asked the Judge.

"Ed?"

"Exactly! Ed has made a fool of himself, and brought this on."

"You think so?"

"Well, I have it pretty straight that he's giving money to the Rebel *junta* and lending every assistance he can to their cause."

"I didn't know he'd actually done anything. How mad!"

"Yes—for a man with interests in Federal territory. But Ed always does the wrong thing, you know."

"Then I presume this confiscation is in the nature of a reprisal. But the stock is mine, not Ed's. I'm an American citizen, and—"

"My dear, you're the first one I've heard boast of the fact," cynically affirmed the Judge. "If you were in Mexico you'd profit more by claiming allegiance to the German or the English or some other foreign flag. The American eagle isn't screaming very loudly on the other side of the Rio Grande just now, and our dusky neighbors have learned that it's perfectly safe to pull his tail feathers."

"I'm surprised at you," Alaire smiled. "Just the same, I want your help in taking up the matter with Washington."

Ellsworth was pessimistic. "It won't do any good, my dear," he said. "You'll get your name in the papers, and perhaps cause another diplomatically worded protest, but there the matter will end. You won't be paid for your cattle."

"Then I shall go to La Feria."

"No!" The Judge shook his head decidedly.

"I've been there a hundred times. The Federals have always been more than courteous."

"Longorio has a bad reputation. I strongly advise against your going."

"Why, Judge, people are going and coming all the time! Mexico is perfectly safe, and I know the country as well as I know Las Palmas."

"You'd better send some man."

"Whom can I send?" asked Alaire. "You know my situation."

The Judge considered a moment before replying. "I can't go, for I'm busy in court. You could probably accomplish more than anybody else, if Longorio will listen to reason, and, after all, you are a person of such importance that I dare say you'd be safe. But it will be a hard trip, and you won't know whether you are in Rebel or in Federal territory."

"Well, people here are asking whether Texas is in the United States or Mexico," Alaire said, lightly. "Sometimes I hardly know." After a moment she continued: "Since you know everything and everybody, I wonder if you ever met a David Law?"

Ellsworth nodded.

"Tell me something about him."

"He asked me the same thing about you. Well, I haven't seen much of Dave since he grew up, he's such a roamer."

"He said his parents were murdered by the Guadalupes."

The Judge looked up quickly; a queer, startled expression flitted over his face. "Dave said that? He said both of them were killed?"

"Yes. Isn't it true?"

"Oh, Dave wouldn't lie. It happened a good many years ago, and certainly they both met a violent end. I was instrumental in saving what property Frank Law left, but it didn't last Dave very long. He's right careless in money matters. Dave's a fine fellow in some ways—most ways, I believe, but—" The Judge lost himself in frowning meditation.

"I have never known you to damn a friend or a client with such faint praise," said Alaire.

"Oh, I don't mean it that way. I'm almost like one of Dave's kin, and I've been keenly interested in watching his traits develop. I'm interested in heredity. I've watched it in Ed's case, for instance. If you know the parents it's easy to read their children." Again he lapsed into silence, nodding to himself. "Yes, Nature mixes her prescriptions like any druggist. I'm glad you and Ed—have no babies."

Alaire mumured something unintelligible.

"And yet," the lawyer continued, "many people are cursed with an inheritance as bad, or worse, than Ed's."

"What has that to do with Mr. Law?"

"Dave? Oh, nothing in particular. I was just—moralizing. It's a privilege of age, my dear."

VI

A JOURNEY, AND A DARK MAN

ALAIRE'S preparations for the journey to La Feria were made with little delay. Owing to the condition of affairs across the border, Ellsworth had thought it well to provide her with letters from the most influential Mexicans in the neighborhood; what is more, in order to pave her way toward a settlement of her claim he succeeded in getting a telegram through to Mexico City—no mean achievement, with most of the wires in Rebel hands and the remainder burdened with military business. But Ellsworth's influence was not bounded by the Rio Grande.

It was his advice that Alaire present her side of the case to the local military authorities before making formal representation to Washington, though in neither case was he sanguine of the outcome.

The United States, indeed, had abetted the Rebel cause from the start. Its embargo on arms had been little more than a pretense of neutrality, which had fooled the Federals not at all, and it was an open secret that financial assistance to the uprising was rendered from some mysterious Northern source. The very presence of American troops along the border was construed by Mexicans as a threat against President Potosi, and an encouragement to revolt, while the talk of intervention, invasion, and war had intensified the natural antagonism existing between the two peoples. So it was that Ellsworth, while he did his best to see to it that his client should make the journey in safety and receive courteous treatment, doubted the wisdom of the undertaking and hoped for no practical result.

Alaire took Dolores with her, and for male escort she selected, after some deliberation, José Sanchez, her horse-breaker. José was not an ideal choice, but since Benito could not well be spared, no better man was available. Sanchez had some force and initiative, at least, and Alaire had no reason to doubt his loyalty.

The party went to Pueblo by motor—an unpleasant trip, for the road followed the river and ran through a lonesome country, unpeopled save for an occasional goat-herd and his family, or a glaring-hot village of some half-dozen cubical houses crouching on the river-bank as if crowded over from Mexican soil. This road remained much as the first ox-carts had laid it out; the hills were gashed by arroyos, some of which were difficult to negotiate, and in consequence the journey was, from an automobilist's point of view, decidedly slow. The first night the travelers were forced to spend at a mud *jacal*, encircled, like some African jungle dwelling, by a thick brush barricade.

José Sanchez was in his element here. He posed, he strutted, he bragged, he strove to impress his countrymen by every device. José was, indeed, rather a handsome fellow, with a bold insolence of bearing that marked him as superior to the common *pelador*, and, having dressed himself elaborately for this journey, he made the most of his opportunities for showing off. Nothing would do him but a *baile*, and a *baile* he had. Once the arrangements were made, other Mexicans appeared mysteriously until there were nearly a score, and until late into the night they danced upon the hard-packed earth of the yard. Alaire fell asleep to the sounds of feet scuffling and scraping in time to a wheezy violin.

Arriving at Pueblo on the following day, Alaire secured her passports from the Federal headquarters across the Rio Grande, while José attended to the railroad tickets. On the second morning after leaving home the party was borne southward into Mexico.

Although train schedules were uncertain, the railroad journey itself was similar to many Alaire had taken, except for occasional evidences of the war. The revolution had ravaged most of northern Mexico; long rows of rusting trucks and twisted car skeletons beside the track showed how the railway's rolling-stock had suffered in this particular vicinity; and as the train penetrated farther south temporary trestles and the charred ruins of station-houses spoke even more eloquently of the struggle. Now and then a steel water-tank, pierced with loopholes and ripped by cannon balls, showed where some detachment had made a stand. There was a military guard on the train, too—a dozen unkempt soldiers loaded down with rifles and bandoliers of cartridges, and several officers, neatly dressed in khaki, who rode in the first-class coach and occupied themselves by making eyes at the women.

At its frequent stops the train was besieged by the customary crowd of curious peons; the same noisy hucksters dealt out *enchiladas*, *tortillas*, goat cheeses, and coffee from the same dirty baskets and pails; even their outstretched hands seemed to bear the familiar grime of ante-bellum days. The coaches were crowded; women fanned themselves unceasingly; their men snored, open-mouthed, over the backs of the seats, and the aisles were full of squalling, squabbling children.

As for the country itself, it was dying. The ranches were stripped of stock, no carts creaked along the highways, and the roads, like the little farms, were growing up to weeds. Stores were empty, the people were idle. Over all was an atmosphere of decay, and, what was far more significant, the people seemed content.

All morning the monotonous journey continued—a trial to Alaire and Dolores, but to José Sanchez a red-letter experience. He covered the train from end to end, making himself acquainted with every one and bringing to Alaire the gossip that he picked up.

It was not until midday that the first interruption occurred; then the train pulled in upon a siding, and after an interminable delay it transpired that a north-bound troop-train was expected.

José brought this intelligence: "Soon you will behold the flower of the Mexican army," he told Alaire. "You will see thousands of Longorio's veterans, every man of them a very devil for blood. They are returning to Nuevo Pueblo after destroying a band of those rebels. They had a great victory at San Pedro—thirty kilometers from La Feria. Not a prisoner was spared, *señora*."

"Is General Longorio with them?" Alaire inquired, quickly.

"That is what I came to tell you. It is believed that he is, for he takes his army with him wherever he goes. He is a great fighter; he has a nose for it, that man, and he strikes like the lightning—here, there, anywhere." José, it seemed, was a rabid Potosista.

But Dolores held opposite sympathies. She uttered a disdainful sniff. "To be sure he takes his army with him, otherwise the Constitutionalistas would kill him. Wait until Pancho Gomez meets this army of Longorio's. Ha! You will see some fighting."

José blew two fierce columns of cigarette smoke from his nostrils. "Longorio is a gentleman; he scorns to use the tricks of that bandit. Pancho Gomez fights like a savage. Think of the cowardly manner in which he captured Espinal the last time. What did he do then? I'll tell you. He laid in wait and allowed a train-load of our troops to pass through his lines toward Chihuahua; then he took possession of the telegraph wires and pretended to be the Federal commander. He sent a lying message back to Espinal that the railway tracks were torn up and he could not reach Chihuahua, and so, of course, he was ordered to return. That was bad enough, but he loaded his bandits upon other trains—he locked them into freight-cars like cattle so that not a head could be seen—and the devil himself would never have guessed what was in those cars. Of course he succeeded. No one suspected the truth until his infamous army was in Espinal. Then it was too late. The carnage was terrible. But do you call that a nice action? It was nothing but the lowest deceit. It was enough to make our soldiers furious."

Dolores giggled. "They say he went to his officers and told them: '*Compadres*, we are now going into Espinal. I will meet you at the Plaza, and I will shoot the last man who arrives there.' *Dios!* There ensued a foot-race."

"It is well for him to train his men how to run fast," said José, frowning sternly, "for some day they will meet Luis Longorio, and then—you will see some of the swiftest running in all the world."

"Yes! Truly!" Dolores was trembling with excitement, her voice was shrill. "God will need to lend them speed to catch this army of Longorio's. Otherwise no human legs could accomplish it."

"Bah! Who can argue with a woman?" sneered José.

Alaire, who had listened smilingly, now intervened to avert a serious quarrel.

"When the train arrives," she told her horse-breaker, "I want you to find General Longorio and ask him to come here."

"But, *señora!*" José was dumfounded, shocked. "He is a great general—"

"Give him this note." Quickly writing a few lines on a page from her note-book, she gave him the scrap of paper, which he carefully placed in his hat; then, shaking his head doubtfully, he left the car.

Flushed with triumph, Dolores took the first occasion to enlarge upon her theme.

"You will see what a monster this Longorio is," she declared. "It was like him to steal your beautiful cattle; he would steal a crucifix. Once there was a fine ranch owned by a man who had two lovely daughters—girls of great respectability and refinement. But the man was a Candelerista. Longorio killed him—he and his men killed everybody on the *hacienda* except the daughters, and those he captured. He took them with him, and for no good purpose, either, as you can imagine. Naturally the poor creatures were nearly dead with fright, but as they rode along the elder one began talking with Longorio's soldiers. She made friends with them. She pretended to care nothing about her fate; she behaved like a lost person, and the soldiers laughed. They liked her spirit, God pity them! Finally she declared she was a famous shot with a pistol, and she continued to boast until one of her guards gave her his weapon with which to show her skill. Then what? Before they could hinder her she turned in her saddle and shot her younger sister through the brain. Herself she destroyed with a bullet in her breast. Every word is the sacred truth, *señora*. Longorio's soul is stained with the blood of those two innocents."

"I've heard many stories like that, from both sides," Alaire said, gravely.

In the course of time the military train came creaking along on the main track and stopped, to the great interest of the southbound travelers. It was made up of many stock cars crowded with cavalry horses. Each animal bore its equipment of saddle and bridle, and penned in with them were the women and the children. The soldiers themselves were clustered thickly upon the car roofs. Far down at the rear of the train was a rickety passenger-coach, and toward this José Sanchez made his way.

There began a noisy interchange of greetings between the occupants of the two trains, and meanwhile the hot sun glared balefully upon the huddled figures on the car tops. A half-hour passed, then occurred a commotion at the forward end of Alaire's coach.

A group of officers climbed aboard, and among them was one who could be none other than Luis Longorio. As he came down the passageway Alaire identified him without the aid of his insignia, for he stood head and shoulders above his companions and bore himself with an air of authority. He was unusually tall, at least six feet three, and very slim, very lithe; he was alert, keen; he was like the blade of a rapier. The leanness of his legs was accentuated by his stiff, starched riding-breeches and close-fitting pigskin puttees, while his face, apart from all else, would have challenged prompt attention.

Longorio was a young man; his cheeks were girlishly smooth and of a clear, pale, olive tint, which sun and weather apparently were powerless to darken; his eyes were large, bold, and brilliant; his nostrils thin and sensitive, like those of a blooded horse. He seemed almost immature until he spoke, then one realized with a curious shock that he was a man indeed, and a man, moreover, with all the ardor and passion of a woman. Such was Alaire's first hasty impression of Luis Longorio, the Tarleton of Potosi's army.

Disdain, hauteur, impatience, were stamped upon the general's countenance as he pushed briskly through the crowd, turning his head from side to side in search of the woman who had summoned him.

Not until she rose did he discover Alaire; then he halted; his eyes fixed themselves upon her with a stare of startled amazement.

Alaire felt herself color faintly, for the man seemed to be scanning her from head to foot, taking in every detail of her face and form, and as he did so his expression remained unaltered. For what seemed a full minute Longorio stood rooted; then the stiff-vizored cap was swept from his head; he bowed with the grace of a courtier until Alaire saw the part in his oily black hair.

"*Señora!* A thousand apologies for my delay," he said. "*Caramba!* I did not dream—I did not understand your message." He continued to regard her with that same queer intensity.

"You are General Longorio?" Alaire was surprised to note that her voice quavered uncertainly, and annoyed to feel her face still flushing.

"Your obedient servant."

With a gesture Mrs. Austin directed Dolores to vacate her seat, and invited the General to take it. But Longorio checked the maid's movement; then with a brusque command he routed out the occupants of the seat ahead, and, reversing the back, took a position facing Alaire. Another order, and the men who had accompanied him withdrew up the aisle. His luminous eyes returned once more to the woman, and there was no mistaking his admiration. He seemed enchanted by her pale beauty, her rich, red hair held him fascinated, and with Latin boldness he made his feelings crassly manifest.

VII

LUIS LONGORIO

"YOU probably know why I wished to see you," Alaire began.

Longorio shook his head in vague denial.

"It is regarding my ranch, La Feria." Seeing that the name conveyed nothing, she explained, "I am told that your army confiscated my cattle."

"Ah yes! Now I understand." The Mexican nodded mechanically, but it was plain that he was not heeding her words in the least. All his mental powers appeared to be concentrated in that disconcerting stare which he still bent upon her. "We confiscate everything—it is a necessity of war," he murmured.

"But this is different. The ranch is mine, and I am an American."

There was a pause. The General made a visible effort to gather his wits. It was now quite patent that the sight of Alaire, the sound of her voice, her first glance, had stricken him with an odd semi-paralysis. As if to shut out a vision or to escape some dazzling sight, he closed his eyes. Alaire wondered if the fellow had been drinking. She turned to Dolores to find that good woman wearing an expression of stupefaction. It was very queer; it made Alaire extremely ill at ease.

Longorio opened his eyes and smiled. "It seems that I have seen you before—as if we were old friends—or as if I had come face to face with myself," said he. "I am affected strangely. It is unaccountable. I know you well—completely—everything about you is familiar to me, and yet we meet for the first time, eh? How do you explain that, unless a miracle—"

"It is merely your imagination."

"Such beauty—here among these common people! I was unprepared." Longorio passed a brown hand across his brow to brush away those perverse fancies that so interfered with his thoughts.

In moments of stress the attention often centers upon trivial things and the mind photographs unimportant objects. Alaire noticed now that one of Longorio's fingers was decorated with a magnificent diamond-and-ruby ring, and this interested her queerly. No ordinary man could fittingly have worn such an ornament, yet on the hand of this splendid barbarian it seemed not at all out of keeping.

"*Dios!* Let me take hold of myself, for my wits are in mutiny," Longorio continued. Then he added, more quietly: "I need not assure you, *señora*, that you have only to command me. Your ranch has been destroyed; your cattle stolen, eh?"

"Yes. At least—"

"We will shoot the perpetrators of this outrage at once. *Bueno!* Come with me and you shall see it with your own eyes."

"No, no! You don't understand."

"So? What then?"

"I don't want to see any one punished. I merely want your government to pay me for my cattle." Alaire laughed nervously.

"Ah! But a lady of refinement should not discuss such a miserable business. It is a matter for men. Bother your pretty head no more about it, and leave me to punish the guilty in my own way."

She endeavored to speak in a brisk, business-like tone. "La Feria belongs to me, personally, and I have managed it for several years, just as I manage Las Palmas, across the river. I am a woman of affairs, General Longorio, and you must talk to me as you would talk to a man. When I heard about this raid I came to look into it—to see you, or whoever is in charge of this district, and to make a claim for damages. Also, I intend to see that nothing similar occurs again. I have delayed making representations to my own government in the hope that I could arrange a satisfactory settlement, and so avoid serious complications. Now you understand why I am here and why I wished to see you."

"*Valgame Dios!* This is amazing. I become more bewildered momentarily."

"There is nothing extraordinary about it, that I can see."

"You think not? You consider such a woman as yourself ordinary? The men of my country enshrine beauty and worship it. They place it apart as a precious gift from God which nothing shall defile. They do not discuss such things with their women. Now this sordid affair is something for your husband—"

"Mr. Austin's business occupies his time; this is my own concern. I am not the only practical woman in Texas."

Longorio appeared to be laboriously digesting this statement. "So!" he said at last. "When you heard of this—you came, eh? You came alone into Mexico, where we are fighting and killing each other? Well! That is spirit. You are wonderful, superb!" He smiled, showing the whitest and evenest teeth.

Such extravagant homage was embarrassing, yet no woman could be wholly displeased by admiration so spontaneous and intense as that which Longorio manifested in every look and word. It was plain to Alaire that something about her had completely bowled him over; perhaps it was her strange red hair and her white foreign face, or perhaps something deeper, something behind all that. Sex phenomena are strange and varied in their workings. Who can explain the instant attraction or repulsion of certain types we meet? Why does the turn of a head, a smile, a glance, move us to the depths? Why does the touch of one stranger's hand thrill us, while another's leaves us quite impassive? Whence springs that personal magnetism which has the power to set the very atoms of our being into new vibrations, like a highly charged electric current?

Alaire knew the susceptibility of Mexican men, and was immune to ordinary flattery; yet there was something exciting about this martial hero's complete captivation. To have charmed him to the point of bewilderment was a unique triumph, and under his hungry eyes she felt an adventurous thrill.

It is true that Luis Longorio was utterly alien, and in that sense almost repellent to Alaire; moreover, she suspected him of being a monster so depraved that no decent woman could bring herself to accept his attentions. Nevertheless, in justice to the fellow, she had to acknowledge that externally, at least, he was immensely superior to the Mexicans she had met. Then, too, his aristocracy was unmistakable, and Alaire prided herself that she could recognize good blood in men as quickly as in horses. The fellow had been favored by birth, by breeding, and by education; and although military service in Mexico was little more than a form of banditry, nevertheless Longorio had developed a certain genius for leadership, nor was there any doubt as to his spectacular courage. In some ways he was a second Cid—another figure out of Castilian romance.

While he and Alaire were talking the passengers had returned to their seats; they were shouting good-byes to the soldiers opposite; the engine-bell was clanging loudly; and now the conductor approached to warn Longorio that the train was about to leave. But the railway official had learned a wholesome respect for uniforms, and therefore he hung back until, urged by necessity, he pushed forward and informed the general of his train orders.

Longorio favored him with a slow stare. "You may go when I leave," said he.

"*Si, señor.* But—"

The general uttered a sharp exclamation of anger, at which the conductor backed away, expressing by voice and gesture his most hearty approval of the change of plan.

"We mustn't hold the train," Alaire said, quickly. "I will arrange to see you in Nuevo Pueblo when I return."

Longorio smiled brilliantly and lifted a brown hand. "No, no! I am a selfish man; I refuse to deprive myself of this pleasure. The end must come all too soon, and as for these *peladors*, an hour more or less will make no difference. Now about these cattle. Mexico does not make war upon women, and I am desolated that the actions of my men have caused annoyance to the most charming lady in the world."

"Ah! You are polite." Knowing that in this man's help alone lay her chance of adjusting her loss, Alaire deliberately smiled upon him. "Can I count upon your help in obtaining my rights?" she asked.

"Assuredly."

"But how? Where?"

Longorio thought for a moment, and his tone altered as he said: "*Señora*, there seems to be an unhappy complication in our way, and this we must remove. First. may I ask, are you a friend to our cause?"

"I am an American, and therefore I am neutral."

"Ah! But Americans are not neutral. There is the whole difficulty. This miserable revolt was fostered by your government; American money supports it; and your men bear arms against us. Your tyrant President is our enemy; his hands itch for Mexico—"

"I can't argue politics with you," Alaire interrupted, positively. "I believe most Americans agree that you have cause for complaint, but what has that to do with my ranch and my cattle? This is something that concerns no one except you and me."

Longorio was plainly flattered by her words, and took no trouble to hide his pleasure. "Ah! If that were only true! We would arrange everything to your satisfaction without another word." His admiring gaze seemed to envelop her, and its warmth was unmistakable. "No one could have the cruelty to deny your slightest wish—I least of all."

"Why did you take my cattle?" she demanded, stubbornly.

"I was coming to that. It is what I meant when I said there was a complication. Your husband, *señora*, is an active Candelerista."

For a moment Alaire was at a loss; then she replied with some spirit: "We are two people, he and I. La Feria belongs to me."

"Nevertheless, his conduct is regrettable," Longorio went on. "Probably evil men have lied to him—San Antonio is full of rebels conspiring to give our country into the hands of outlaws. What a terrible spectacle it is! Enough to bring tears to the eyes of any patriot!" He turned his melancholy gaze from Alaire to her companion, and for the first time Dolores stirred.

She had watched her countryman with a peculiar fascination, and she had listened breathlessly to his words. Now she inhaled deeply, as if freed from a spell: then she said:

"Pah! Nobody pays heed to *Señor* Ed. We do not consider him."

Dolores lacked diplomacy; her bluntness was often trying. Alaire turned upon her with a sharp exclamation, conscious meanwhile that the woman's tone, even more than her words, had enlightened Longorio to some extent. His lifted brows were eloquent of surprise and curiosity, but he held his tongue.

"Am I to understand, then, that you rob me because of my husband's action?" Alaire asked.

"No. But we must combat our enemies with the weapons we have—not only those who bear arms with Candeleria, but those who shelter themselves beyond the Rio Grande."

Alaire's face fell. "I had hoped that you would understand and help me, but I shall go to Mexico City and demand my rights, if necessary."

"Wait! I *shall* help." Longorio beamed enthusiastically. "It shall be the object of my life to serve you, and you and I shall arrange this matter satisfactorily. I have influence, believe me. A word from Luis Longorio will go further with my chief than a protest from your President. General Potosi is a man of the highest honor, and I am his right hand. Very well, then! Duty calls me to Nuevo Pueblo, and you shall return with me as the guest of my government. *Dios!* It is a miserable train, but you shall occupy the coach and travel as befits a queen of beauty—like a royal princess with her guard of honor." He rose to his feet, but his eagerness soon gave place to disappointment.

"Thank you," said Alaire, "but I must first go to La Feria and get all the facts."

"*Señora!* It is a wretched journey. See!" He waved a contemptuous gesture at the car, crowded to congestion. "There is no food; you have no one to wait upon you. In my company you will be safe. Upon my honor you will enjoy the highest courtesy—"

"Of course. But I must go on. I have Dolores and

José to look after me." Alaire indicated Sanchez, who had edged his way close and now stood with admiring eyes fixed upon his hero.

"Yes, *mi General*," José exclaimed, eagerly, "I am here."

Longorio scrutinized the horse-breaker critically. "Your name is—?"

"José Sanchez."

"You look like a brave fellow."

José swelled at this praise, and no doubt would have made suitable answer, but his employer held out her hand, and General Longorio bent over it, raising it to his lips.

"*Señora*, one favor you can grant me. No! It is a right I shall claim." He called one of his subordinates closer and ordered that a lieutenant and six soldiers be detached to act as an escort to Mrs. Austin's party. "It is nothing," he assured her. "It is the least I can do. Have no uneasiness, for these men are the bravest of my command, and they shall answer with their lives for your safety. As for that *teniente*—ah, he is favored above his general!" Longorio rolled his eyes. "Think of it! I could be faithless to duty—a traitor to my country—for the privilege he is to enjoy. It is the sacred truth! *Señora*, the hours will drag until I may see you again and be of further service. Meanwhile I shall be tortured with radiant dreams. Go with God!" For a second time he bowed and kissed the hand he held, then, taking José Sanchez intimately by the arm, he turned to the door.

Dolores collapsed into her seat with an exclamation. "*Caramba!* The man is a demon! And such eyes. Uf! They say he was so furious at losing those two sisters I told you about that he killed the soldier with the very weapon—"

Dolores was interrupted by Longorio's voice beneath the open window. The general stood, cap in hand, holding up to Alaire a solitary wild flower which he had plucked beside the track.

"See!" he cried. "It is the color of your adorable eyes—blue like a sapphire gem. I saw it peeping at me, and it was lonely. But now, behold how it smiles—like a star that sees Paradise, eh? And I, too, have seen Paradise." He placed the delicate bloom in Alaire's fingers and was gone.

"*Cuidado!*" breathed Dolores. "There is blood on it; the blood of innocents. He will burn for a million years in hell, that man."

Longorio made good his promise; soon a grizzled old *teniente*, with six soldiers, was transferred as a bodyguard to the American lady, and then, after some further delay, the military train departed. Upon the rear platform stood a tall, slim, khaki-clad figure, and until the car had dwindled away down the track, foreshortening to a mere rectangular dot, Luis Longorio remained motionless, staring with eager eyes through the capering dust and the billowing heat waves.

José Sanchez came plowing into Alaire's car, tremendously excited. "Look, *señora!*" he cried. "Look what the general gave me," and he proudly displayed Longorio's service revolver. Around José's waist was the cartridge-belt and holster that went with the weapon. "With his own hands he buckled it about me, and he said, 'José, something tells me you are a devil for bravery. Guard your mistress with your life, for if any mishap befalls her I shall cut out your heart with my own hands.' Those were his very words, *señora*. *Caramba!* There is a man to die for."

Nor was this the last of Longorio's dramatic surprises. Shortly after the train had got under way the lieutenant in command of Alaire's guard brought her a small package, saying:

"The general commanded me to hand you this, with his deepest regard."

Alaire accepted the object curiously. It was small and heavy and wrapped in several leaves torn from a notebook, and it proved to be nothing less than the splendid diamond-and-ruby ring she had admired.

"God protect us, now!" murmured Dolores, crossing herself devoutly.

VIII

BLAZE JONES'S NEMESIS

BLAZE JONES rode up to his front gate and dismounted in the shade of the big ebony-tree. He stepped back and ran an approving eye over another animal tethered there. It was a thoroughbred bay mare he had never seen, and as he scanned her good points he reflected that the time had come when he would have to accustom himself to the sight of strange horses along his fence and strange automobiles beside the road, for Paloma was a woman now, and the young men of the neighborhood had made the discovery. Yes, and Paloma was a pretty woman; therefore the hole under the ebony-tree would probably be worn deep by impatient hoofs. He was glad that most of the boys preferred saddles to soft upholstery, for it argued that some vigor still remained in Texas manhood, and that the country had not been entirely ruined by motors, picture-shows, low shoes, and high collars. Of course the youths of this day were nothing like the youths of his own, and yet—Blaze let his gaze linger fondly on the high-bred mare and her equipment—here at least was a person who knew a good horse, a good saddle, and a good gun.

As he came up the walk he heard Paloma laugh, and his own face lightened, for Paloma's merriment was contagious. Then as he mounted the steps and turned the corner of the "gallery" he uttered a hearty greeting.

"Dave Law! Where in the world did you drop from?"

Law uncoiled himself and took the ranchman's hand. "Hello, Blaze! I been ordered down here to keep you straight."

"Pshaw! Now who's giving you orders, Dave?"

"Why, I'm with the Rangers."

"Never knew a word of it. Last I heard you was filibustering around with the Maderistas."

Blaze seated himself with a grateful sigh where the breeze played over him. He was a big, bearlike, swarthy man with the square-hewn, deep-lined face of a tragedian, and a head of long, curly hair which he wore parted in a line over his left ear. Jones was a character, a local landmark. This part of Texas had grown up with Blaze, and, inasmuch as he had sprung from a free race of pioneers, he possessed a splendid indifference to the artificial fads of dress and manners. It was only since Paloma had attained her womanhood that he had been forced to fight down his deep-seated distrust of neckwear and store clothes and the like; but now that his daughter had definitely asserted her rights, he had acquired numerous unwelcome graces, and no longer ventured among strangers without the stamp of her approval upon his appearance. Only at home did he maintain what he considered a manly independence of speech and habit. To-day, therefore, found him in a favorite suit of baggy, wrinkled linen and with a week's stubble of beard upon his chin. He was so plainly an outdoor man that the air of erudition lent him by the pair of gold-rimmed spectacles owlishly perched upon his sunburned nose was strangely incongruous.

"So you're a Ranger, and got notches on your gun." Blaze rolled and lit a tiny cigarette, scarcely larger than a wheat straw. "Well, you'd ought to make a right able thief-catcher, Dave, only for your size—you're too long for a man and you ain't long enough for a snake. Still, I reckon a thief would have trouble getting out of your reach, and once you got close to him— How many men have you killed?"

"Counting Mexicans?" Law inquired, with a smile.

"Hell! Nobody counts them."

"Not many."

"That's good." Blaze nodded and relit his cigarette, which he had permitted promptly to smolder out. "The Force ain't what it was. Most of the boys nowadays join so they can ride a horse cross-lots, pack a pair of guns, and give rein to the predilections of a vicious ancestry. They're bad rams, most of 'em."

"There aren't many," said Paloma. "Dave tells me the whole Force has been cut down to sixteen."

"That's plenty," her father averred. "It's like when Cap'n Bill McDonald was sent to stop a riot in Dallas. He came to town alone, and when the citizens asked him where his men was, he said, 'Hell! 'Ain't I enough? There's only one riot.' Are you workin' up a case, Dave?"

"Um-m—yes! People are missing a lot of stock hereabouts."

"It's these blamed refugees from the war! A Mexican has to steal something or he gets run down and pore. If it ain't stock, it's something else. Why, one morning I rode into Jonesville in time to see four Greasers walkin' down the main street with feed-sacks over their shoulders. Each one of those gunnie's had something long and flat and heavy in it, and I growed curious. When I investigated, what d'you suppose I found? Tombstones! That's right; four marble beauties fresh from the cemetery. Well, it made me right sore, for I'd helped to start Jonesville. I was its city father. I'd made the place fit to live in, and I aimed to keep it safe to die in, and so, bein' a sort of left-handed, self-appointed deppity-sheriff, I rounded up those ghouls and drove 'em to the county-seat in my spring wagon. I had the evidence propped up against the front of our real-estate office—'Sacred to the Memory' of four of our leading citizens—so I jailed 'em. But that's all the good it did."

"Couldn't convict, eh?"

Blaze lit his cigarette for the third time. "The prosecuting attorney and I wasn't very good friends, seeing as how I'd had to kill his daddy, so he turned 'em loose. I'm damned if those four Greasers didn't beat me back to Jonesville." Blaze shook his head ruminatively. "This was a hard country, those days. There wasn't but two honest men in this whole valley—and the other one was a nigger."

Dave Law's duties as a Ranger rested lightly upon him; his instructions were vague, and he had a leisurely method of "working up" his evidence. Since he knew that Blaze possessed a thorough knowledge of this section and its people, it was partly business which had brought him to the Jones home this afternoon.

Strictly speaking, Blaze was not a rancher, although many of his acres were under cultivation and he employed a sizable army of field-hands. His disposition was too adventurous, his life had been too swift and varied, for him to remain interested in slow agricultural pursuits; therefore, he had speculated heavily in raw lands, and for several years past he had devoted his energies to a gigantic colonization scheme. Originally Blaze had come to the Rio Grande valley as a stock-raiser, but the natural advantages of the country had appealed to his gambling instinct, and he had "gone broke" buying land.

He had located, some fifteen miles below the borders of Las Palmas, and there he had sunk a large fortune; then as a first step in his colonization project he had founded the town of Jonesville. Next he had caused the branch line of the Frisco railroad to be extended until it linked his holdings with the main system, after which he had floated a big irrigation company; and now the feat of paying interest on its bonds and selling farms under the ditch to Northern people kept him fully occupied. It was by no means a small operation in which he was engaged. The venture had taken foresight, courage, infinite hard work; and Blaze was burdened with responsibilities that would have broken down a man of weaker fiber.

But his pet relaxation was reminiscence. His own experience had been wide, he knew everybody in his part of the state, and although events in his telling were sometimes colored by his rich imagination, the information he could give was often of the greatest value—as Dave Law knew.

After a time the latter said, casually, "Tell me something about Tad Lewis."

Blaze looked up quickly. "What d'you want to know?"

"Anything. Everything."

"Tad owns a right nice ranch between here and Las Palmas," Blaze said, cautiously.

Paloma broke out, impatiently: "Why don't you say what you think?" Then to Dave: "Tad Lewis is a bad neighbor, and always has been. There's a ford on his place, and we think he knows more about 'wet' cattle than he cares to tell."

"It's a good place to cross stock at low water," her father agreed, "and Lewis's land runs back from the Rio Grande in its old Spanish form. It's a natural outlet for those brush-country *ranchos*. But I haven't anything against Tad except a natural dislike. He stands well with some of our best people, so I'm probably wrong. I usually am."

"You can't call Ed Austin one of our best people," sharply objected Paloma. "They claim that arms are being smuggled across to the Rebels, Dave, and, if it's true, Ed Austin—"

"Now, Paloma," her father remonstrated mildly.

"The Regulars and the River Guards watched Lewis's ranch till the embargo was lifted, and they never saw anything."

"I believe Austin is a strong Rebel sympathizer," Law ventured.

"Sure! And him and the Lewis outfit are *amigos*. If you go pirootin' around Tad's place you're more'n apt to make yourself unpopular, Dave. I'd grieve some to see you in a wooden kimono. Tad's too well fixed to steal cattle, and if he runs arms it's because of his sympathy for those noble, dark-skinned patriots we hear so much about in Washington. Tad's a 'galvanized Gringo' himself—married a Mexican, you know."

"Nobody pays much attention to the embargo," Law agreed. "I ran arms myself, before I joined the Force."

When meal-time drew near, both Jones and his daughter urged their guest to stay and dine with them, and Dave was glad to accept.

"After supper I'm going to show you our town," Blaze declared. "It's the finest city in South Texas, and growing like a weed. All we need is good farmers. Those we've got are mostly back-to-nature students who leaped a drug-counter expecting to 'light in the lap of luxury. In the last outfit we sold there wasn't three men that knew which end of a mule to put the collar on. But they'll learn. Nature's with 'em, and so am I. God supplies 'em with all the fresh air and sunshine they need, and when they want anything else they come to Old Blaze. Ain't that right, Paloma?"

"Yes, father."

Paloma Jones had developed wonderfully since Dave Law had last seen her. She had grown into a most wholesome and attractive young woman, with an unusually capable manner, and an honest, humorous pair of brown eyes. During dinner she did her part with a grace that made watching her a pleasure, and the Ranger found it a great treat to sit at her table after his strenuous scouting days in the mesquite.

"I'm glad to hear Jonesville is prosperous," he told his host. "And they say you're in everything."

"That's right; and prosperity's no name for it. Everybody wants Blaze to have a finger in the pie. I'm interested in the bank, the sugar-mill, the hardware-store, the ice-plant— Say, that ice-plant's a luxury for a town this size. D'you know what I made out of it last year?"

"I've no idea."

"Twenty-seven thousand dollars!" The father of Jonesville spoke proudly, impressively, and then through habit called upon his daughter for verification. "Didn't I, Paloma?"

Miss Paloma's answer was unexpected, and came with equal emphasis: "No, you didn't, father. The miserable thing lost money."

Blaze was only momentarily dismayed. Then he joined in his visitor's laughter. "How can a man get along without the co-operation of his own household?" he inquired, naïvely. "Maybe it was next year I was thinking about." Thereafter he confined himself to statements which required no corroboration.

Dave had long since learned that to hold Blaze Jones to a strict accountability with fact was to rob his society of its greatest charm. A slavish accuracy in figures, an arid lack of imagination, reduces conversation to the insipidness of flat wine, and Blaze's talk was never dull. He was a keen, shrewd, practical man, but somewhere in his being there was concealed a tremendous, lop-sided sense of humor which took the form of a bewildering imagery. An attentive audience was enough for him, and, once his fancy was in full swing, there was no limit to his outrageous exaggerations. A light of credulity in a hearer's eye filled him with prodigious mirth, and it is doubtful if his listeners ever derived a fraction of the amusement from his fabrications that he himself enjoyed. Paloma's spirit of contradiction was the only fly in his ointment; now that his daughter was old enough to "keep books" on him, much of the story-teller's joy was denied him.

Of course his proclivities occasionally led to misapprehensions; chance acquaintances who recognized him as an artful romancer were liable to consider him generally untruthful. But even in this misconception Blaze took a quiet delight, secure in the knowledge that all who knew him well regarded him as a rock of integrity. As a matter of fact, his genuine exploits were quite as sensational as those of his manufacture.

When, after supper, Blaze had hitched a pair of driving-mules to his buckboard, preparatory to showing his guest the glories of Jonesville, Dave said:

"Paloma's getting mighty pretty."

"She's as pretty as a blue-bonnet flower," her father agreed. "And she runs me around something scandalous. I 'ain't got the freedom of a *peon*." Blaze sighed and shook his shaggy head. "You know me, Dave; I never used to be scared of nobody. Well, it's different now. She rides me with a Spanish bit, and my soul ain't my own." With a sudden lightening of his gloom, he added: "Say, you're going to stay right here with us as long as you're in town; I want you to see how I cringe."

In spite of Blaze's plaintive tone it was patent that he was inordinately proud of Paloma and well content with his serfdom.

Jonesville proved to be a typical Texas town of the modern variety, and altogether different to the pictured frontier village. There were no one-storied square fronts, no rows of saloons with well-gnawed hitching-rails, no rioting cowboys. On the contrary, the larger buildings were of artificial stone, the sidewalks of concrete, and the store fronts of plate-glass. Arc-lights shed a bluishwhite glare over the wide street-crossings, and all in all the effect was much like that of a prosperous, orderly Northern farming town.

Not that Jonesville would have filled an eye for beauty. It was too new and crude and awkward for that. It fitted loosely into its clothes, for its citizens had patterned it with regard for the future, and it sprawled over twice its legitimate area. But to its happy founder it seemed well-nigh perfect, and its destiny roused his maddest enthusiasm. He showed Dave the little red frame railroad station, distinguished in some mysterious way above the hundred thousand other little red frame railroad stations of the identical size and style; he pointed out the Odd Fellows Hall, the Palace Picture Theater, with its glaring orange lights and discordant electric piano; he conducted Law to the First National Bank, of which Blaze was a proud but somewhat ornamental director; then to the sugar-mill, the ice-plant, and other points of equally novel interest.

Everywhere he went, Jones was hailed by friends, for everybody seemed to know him and to want to shake his hand.

"*Some* town and *some* body of men, eh?" he inquired, finally, and Dave agreed:

"Yes. She's got a grand framework, Blaze. She'll be most as big as Fort Worth when you fatten her up."

Jones waved his buggy-whip in a wide circle that took in the miles of level prairie on all sides. "We've got the whole blamed state to grow in. And, Dave, I haven't got an enemy in the place! It wasn't many years ago that certain people allowed I'd never live to raise this town. Why, it used to be that nobody dared to ride with me—except Paloma, and she used to sleep with a shot-gun at her bedside."

"You sure have been a responsibility to her."

"But I'm as safe now as if I was in church."

Law ventured to remark that none of Blaze's enemies had grown fat in prosecuting their feuds, but this was a subject which the elder man invariably found embarrassing, and now he said:

"Pshaw! I never was the blood-letter people think. I'm as gentle as a sheep." Then to escape further curiosity on that point he suggested that they round out their riotous evening with a game of pool.

Law boasted a liberal education, but he was no match for the father of Jonesville, who wielded a cue with a dexterity born of years of devotion to the game. In consequence, Blaze's enjoyment was in a fair way to languish when the proprietor of the Elite Billiard Parlor returned from supper to say:

"Mr. Jones, there's a real good pool-player in town, and he wants to meet you."

Blaze uttered a triumphant cry. "Get him, quick! Send the brass-band to bring him. Dave, you hook your spurs over the rung of a chair and watch your uncle clean this tenderfoot. If he's got class, I'll make him mayor of the town, for a good pool-shooter is all this metropolis lacks. Why, sometimes I go plumb to San Antone for a game." He whispered in his friend's ear, "Paloma don't let me gamble, but if you've got any *dinero*, get it down on me." Then, addressing the bystanders, he proclaimed, "Boys, if this pilgrim is good enough to stretch me out we'll marry him off and settle him down."

"No chance, Uncle Blaze; he's the most married person in town," some one volunteered. "His wife is the new dressmaker—and she's got a mustache." For some reason this remark excited general mirth.

"That's too bad. I never saw but one woman with a mustache, and she licked me good. If he's yoked up to that kind of a lady, I allow his nerves will be wrecked before he gets here. I hope to God he ain't entirely done for." Blaze ran the last three balls from a well-nigh impossible position, then racked up the whole fifteen with trembling eagerness and eyed the door expectantly. He was wiping his spectacles when the proprietor returned with a slim, sallow man whom he introduced as Mr. Strange.

"Welcome to our city!" Blaze cried, with a flourish of his glasses. "Get a prod, Mr. Strange, and bust 'em, while I clean my wind-shields. These fellow-townsmen of mine handle a cue like it was an ox-gad."

Mr. Strange selected a cue, studied the pyramid for an instant, then called the three ball for the upper left-hand corner, and pocketed it, following which he ran the remaining fourteen. Blaze watched this procedure near-sightedly, and when the table was bare he thumped his cue loudly upon the floor. He beamed upon his opponent; he appeared ready to embrace him.

"*Bueno!* There's art, science, and natural aptitude! Fly at 'em again, Mr. Strange, and take your fill." He finished polishing his spectacles, and readjusted them. "I aim to make you so comfortable in Jonesville that—" Blaze paused, he started, and a peculiar expression crept over his face.

It seemed to Law that his friend actually turned pale; at any rate, his mouth dropped open and his gaze was no longer hypnotically following the pool-balls, but was fixed upon his opponent.

Now there were chapters in the life of Blaze Jones that had never been fully written, and it occurred to Dave that such a one had been suddenly reopened; therefore he prepared himself for some kind of an outburst. But Blaze appeared to be numbed; he even jumped nervously when Mr. Strange missed a shot and advised him that his chance had come.

As water escapes from a leaky pail, so had Jones's fondness for pool oozed away, and with it had gone his accustomed skill. He shot blindly, and, much to the general surprise, missed an easy attempt.

"Can't expect to get 'em all," comfortingly observed Mr. Strange as he executed a combination that netted him two balls and broke the bunch. After that he proved the insincerity of his statement by clearing the cloth for a second time. The succeeding frames went much the same, and finally Blaze put up his cue, mumbling:

"I reckon I must have another chill coming on. My feet are plumb dead."

"Cold feet are sure bad." Strange favored the crowd with a wink.

"I'm sort of sick."

"That's tough!" the victor exclaimed, regretfully. "But I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll take a little look into the future."

"What d'you mean?"

"Simply this: Nature has favored me with second sight and the ability to read fortunes. I foretell good an' evil, questions of love and mattermony by means of numbers, cards, dice, dominoes, apple-parings, egg-shells, tea-leaves, an' coffee-grounds." The speaker's voice had taken on the brazen tones of a circus barker. "I pro'nosticate by charms, ceremonies, omens, and moles; by the features of the face, lines of the hand, spots an' blemishes of the skin. I speak the language of flowers. I know one hundred and eighty-seven weather signs, and I interpet dreams. Now, ladies and gents, this is no idle boast. Triflin' incidents, little marks on the cuticle, although they appear to be the effect of chance, are nevertheless of the utmost consequence, an' to the skilled interpeter they foretell the temper of, an' the events that will happen to, the person bearin' 'em. Now let us take this little deck of common playing-cards—"

The monologist, suiting the action to the word, conjured a deck of cards from somewhere, and extended them to Blaze. "Select one; any one—"

"Hell!" snorted Jones, slipping into his coat.

"'You are a skeptic! Very well. I convince nobody against his will. But wait! You have a strong face. Stand where you are." Extracting from another pocket a tiny pair of scissors and a sheet of carbon paper, Mr. Strange, with the undivided attention of the audience upon him, began to cut Blaze's silhouette. He was extraordinarily adept, and despite his subject's restlessness he completed the likeness in a few moments; then, fixing it upon a plain white cardboard, he presented it with a flourish.

Blaze accepted the thing and plunged for the open air.

IX

A SCOUTING TRIP

"WHAT ails you?" Law inquired as he and Blaze rolled away in the buckboard.

"Serves me right for leaving my six-shooter at home," panted the rancher. "Well, I might have known they'd find me some day."

"'They'? Who?"

"That *hombre* and his wife—the woman with the mustache. They swore they'd get me, and it looks like they will, for I daresn't raise my hand to protect myself."

This was very mystifying to Dave, and he said so.

"The woman 'll recognize me, quick enough," Blaze asserted, and then, "God knows what Paloma will do."

"Really! Is it that bad?"

"It's a vile story, Dave, and I never expected to tell anybody; but it's bound to come out on me now, so you better hear my side. Last summer I attended a convention at Galveston, and one hot day I decided to take a swim, so I hired a suit and a room to cache my six-shooter in. It was foolish proceedings for a man my age, but the beach was black with people and I wasn't altogether myself. You see, we'd had an open poker game running in my room for three days, and I hadn't got any sleep. I was plumb feverish, and needed a dip. Well, I'm no water-dog, Dave; I can't swim no better than a tarrapin with its legs cut off, but I sloshed around some in the surf, and then I took a walk to dreen off and see the sights. It was right interesting when I got so I could tell the women from the men—you see I'd left my glasses in the bath-house.

"Now I'd sort of upheld the general intemperance of that poker game for three days and nights—but I don't offer my condition as an excuse for what follows. No gentleman ought to lay his indecencies onto John Barleycorn when they're nothing more nor less than the outcroppin's of his own orneriness. Liquor has got enough to answer for without being blamed for human depravities. I dare say I was friendlier than I had any right to be; I spoke to strangers, and some of the girls hollered at me, but I wouldn't have harmed a soul.

"Well, in the course of my promenade I came to a couple of fellers setting half-buried in the sand, and just as I was passing one of them got up—sort of on all-fours and—er—facing away from me—*sabe?* That's where the trouble hatched. I reached out and, with nothing but good-will in my heart, I—sort of pinched this party—sort of on the hip, or thereabouts. I didn't mean a thing by it, Dave. I just walked on, smiling, till something run into me from behind. When I got up and squared around, there was that man we just left cutting didos out of black paper.

"'What d'you mean by pinching my wife?' he says, and he was r'arin' mad.

"'Your *wife?*' I stammers, and with that he climbs me. Dave, I was weak with shame and surprise, and all I could do was hold him off. Sure enough, the man I'd pinched was a long, ga'nt woman with a little black mustache, and here she came!

"We started in right there. I never saw such a poisonous person as that woman. She was coiled, her head was up, and her rattles agoing, and so I finally lit out

But I'm sort of fat, and they over-ran me. They bayed me against the sea-wall, and all I had the heart to do was to hold 'em off some more. Soon as I got my wind I shook 'em off a second time and run some more, but they downed me. By that time we'd begun to gather quite a crowd. . . .

"Dave, was you ever treed by wild hogs? That's how them two people kept after me. You'd have thought I'd deprived 'em of their young. I didn't want to hurt 'em, but whenever I'd run they'd tangle my legs. By and by I got so short of breath that I couldn't run, so I fell on top of the man. But the woman got me by the legs and rolled me under. I busted out and hoofed it again, but they caught me and down we went, me on top. Then that man's helpmate grabbed my legs and rolled me over, like she did before. Finally I got too tired to do anything but paw like a puppy. It seems like we must have fought that way all the morning, Dave. Anyhow, people gathered from long distances and cheered the woman. I got desperate toward the last, and I unraveled the right hip of my bathing suit grabbing for my gun. I couldn't see the bath-house for the sand in my eyes, so I must have led 'em up across the boulevard and into the tent colony, for after a while we were rolling around among tent-pegs and tangling up in guy-ropes, and all the time our audience was growing. Dave, those tent-ropes sounded like guitar strings."

Blaze paused to wipe the sweat from his brow, whereupon his listener inquired in a choking voice:

"How did you come out?"

"I reckon I'd have got shed of 'em somehow, for I was resting up on top of my man, but that stinging lizard of a woman got her claws into the neck of my bathing-suit and r'ared back on it. Dave, she skinned me out of that garment the way you'd skin out an eel, and—there I was! You never heard such a yelling as went up. And I didn't hear all of it, either, for I just laid back my ears and went through those sight-seers like a jack-rabbit. I never knew a man could run like I did. I could hear people holler, 'Here he comes,' 'There he goes,' 'Yonder he went,' but I was never headed. I hurdled the sea-wall like an antelope, and before they got eyes on me I was into my bath-house.

"When I'd got dressed, I sneaked up to the Galvez for a drink. In the bar were a lot of stockmen, and they asked me where I'd been. I told 'em I'd been nursing a sick lodge member, and they said:

"'Too bad! You missed the damnedest fight since Custer was licked. We couldn't get very close, for the jam, but it was great!'

"The story went all over Galveston. The husband swore he'd kill the man who attacked his wife, and the newspapers called on the police to discover the ruffian."

There was a protracted silence; then Law controlled his voice sufficiently to say: "It's fortunate he didn't recognize you to-night."

"Maybe he did. Anyhow, his wife is the new dressmaker Paloma's hired. I 'ain't got a chance, Dave. That story will ruin me in the community, and Paloma will turn me out when she learns I'm a—a lady-pincher."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Blaze sighed. "I don't know, yet. Probably I'll end by running from those scorpions, like I did before."

The next morning at breakfast Paloma announced, "Father, you must help Dave hunt down these cattle thieves."

"Ain't that sort of a big order?" Blaze queried.

"Perhaps, but you're the very man to do it. Ricardo Guzman is the only person who knows the Lewis gang as well as you do."

Jones shook his head doubtfully. "Don Ricardo has been working up his own private feud with that outfit.

If I was the kind that went looking for a fight, I wouldn't have paid freight on myself from the Panhandle down here. I could have got one right at home, any morning before breakfast."

"Ricardo Guzman is something of a black sheep himself," Law spoke up.

"Pshaw! He's all right. I reckon he has changed a few brands in his time, but so has everybody else. Why, that's how 'Old Ed' Austin got his start. If a cowman tells you he never stole anything, he's either a dam' good liar or a dam' bad roper. But Ricardo's going straight enough now."

"He has lost his share of stock," Paloma explained, "and he'll work with you if father asks him. You go along with Dave—"

"I'm too busy," Blaze demurred, "and I ain't feeling good. I had bad dreams all night."

"I don't want you around here this morning. That new dressmaker is coming."

Jones rose abruptly from the table. "I reckon my business can wait. Hustle up, Dave." A few moments later, as they were saddling their horses, he lamented: "What did I tell you? Here I go, on the dodge from a dressmaker. I s'pose I've got to live like a road-agent now, till something happens."

Don Ricardo Guzman was an American, but he spoke no English. An accident of birth had made him a citizen of the United States—his father having owned a ranch which lay north instead of south of the Rio Grande. Inasmuch as the property had fallen to Ricardo, his sons, too, were Yankees in the eyes of the law. But in all other respects Don Ricardo and his family differed not at all from the many Guzmans who lived across the border. The Guzman ranch comprised a goodly number of acres, and, since live stock multiply rapidly, its owner had in some sort prospered. On the bank of a *resaca*—a former bed of the Rio Grande—stood the house, an adobe structure, square, white, and unprotected from the sun by shrub or tree. Behind it were some brush corrals and a few scattered mud *jacals*, in which lived the help.

Ricardo had just risen from a siesta when his two visitors rode up, and he made them welcome with the best he had. There followed a complimentary exchange of greetings and the usual flow of small talk. Ricardo had suffered a severe toothache—the same abominable affliction that had lost Porfirio Diaz an empire. It had been a dry spring, but, praise God, the water still held in the *resaca*—his two sons were branding calves in one of the outer pastures—and there had been a very good calf crop indeed. Blaze recounted his own doings; Law told of Ranger activities along the lower border. In the cool of the afternoon Ricardo rode with his visitors, and then, cordial relations being now established, he began to divulge information of value to Law.

Yes, he had endured many depredations from thieves. It was shameful, but doubtless God willed that a certain amount of stealing should go on in the world. The evildoers were certainly favored by nature, in this locality, for the great expanse of brush country to the north and east offered almost perfect security, and the river, to the south, gave immunity from pursuit or prosecution. The beeves were driven north into the wilderness, but the horses went to Mexico, where the war had created a market for them. The Federals had plenty of money to buy mounts.

Whom did Don Ricardo suspect?

The old man was non-committal. Suspicion was one thing, proof was quite another; and conviction was difficult under the best of circumstances. Why, even a cow's recognition of her own calf was not evidence for a court, and alibis were easily proven. Unless the thieves were caught in the very act there was no case against them; and—*por Dios!*—one could not be for ever on guard. Who could tell where the malefactors would strike next? Now, in Mexico one could afford to kill an undesirable neighbor without so much formality. But, thank God! Don Ricardo was not a Mexican. No, he was a good American citizen. It was something to make him sleep well in these war-times.

"Just the same, I'll bet he'd sleep better if the Lewis outfit was cleaned up," Dave ventured, and Blaze agreed.

Guzman caught his enemy's name and nodded.

"Ah! That *sin verguenza!* He sells arms to the Candeleristas and horses to the Potosistas. Perhaps he steals my calves. Who knows?"

"*Señor* Lewis doesn't need to steal. He has money," Jones argued.

"True! But who is so rich that he would not be richer? Lewis employs men who are poor, and he himself is above nothing. I, too, am a friend of the Rebels. Panchito, the Liberator, was a saint, and I give money to the patriots who fight for his memory. But I do not aid the tyrant Potosi with my other hand. Yes, and who is richer, for instance, than *Señor* Eduardo Austin?"

"You surely don't accuse him of double-dealing with the Rebels?" Blaze inquired, curiously.

"I don't know. He is a friend of Tad Lewis, and there are strange stories afloat."

Just what these stories were, however, Ricardo would not say, feeling, perhaps, that he had already said too much.

The three men spent that evening together, and in the morning Blaze rode home, leaving the Ranger behind for the time being as Guzman's guest.

Dave put in the next two days riding the pastures, familiarizing himself with the country, and talking with the few men he met. About all he discovered, however, was the fact that the Guzman range not only adjoined some of Lewis's leased land, but also was bounded for several miles by the Las Palmas fence.

It was pleasant to spend the days among the shy brush-cattle, with Bessie Belle for company. The mare seemed to enjoy the excursions as much as her owner. Her eyes and ears were ever alert; she tossed her head and snorted when a deer broke cover or a jack-rabbit scuttled out of her path; she showed a friendly interest in the awkward calves which stood and eyed her with such amazement and then galloped stiffly off with tails high arched.

Law had many times undertaken to break Bessie Belle of that habit of flinging her head high at sudden sounds, but she was nervous and inquisitive, and this was the one thing upon which she maintained a feminine obstinacy.

On the second evening the Ranger rode home through a drizzle that had materialized after a long, threatening afternoon and now promised to become a real rain. Ricardo met him at the door to say:

"You bring good fortune with you, *señor*, for the land is thirsty To-morrow, if this rain holds, we shall ride together—you, Pedro, and I. Those thieves do their stealing when they leave no tracks."

Raoul, the younger son, volunteered to go in place of his father, but Ricardo would not hear of it.

"Am I so old that I must lie abed?" he cried. "No! We three shall ride the fences, and if we encounter a cut wire—*diablo!*—we shall have a story to tell, eh?"

The sky was leaden, the rain still fell in the morning when Dave and his two companions set out. Until noon they rode, their slickers dripping, their horses steaming; then they ate an uncomfortable lunch under the thickest hackberry-tree they could find, after which they resumed their patrol. Ricardo's tongue at length ran down under this discomfort, and the three riders sat their saddles silently, swaying to the tireless fox-trot of their horses, their eyes engaged in a watchful scrutiny.

At last Pedro, who was ahead, reined in and pointed; the others saw where the barbed-wire strands of the fence they had been following were clipped. A number of horse and calf tracks led through the opening, and after an examination Ricardo announced:

"There are two men. They have come and gone, with the calves tied neck and neck."

"That is Las Palmas, isn't it?" Law indicated the pasture into which the trail led.

Father and son answered, "*Si, señor.*"

For a time the Ranger lounged sidewise in his saddle, studying the country before him. The land was open and comparatively flat; it was broken by tiny clumps of mesquite and low, sprawling beds of cactus. Perhaps a half-mile away, however, began a long, narrow patch of woods, with the tops of occasional oaks showing, and this ran parallel with the fence for a considerable distance.

"They took them in yonder, to brand," he said, straightening himself. "Maybe we'll be in time."

Side by side the three men rode off Guzman's land, following the tracks to the nearest point of woods; there Law stopped to give his directions.

"Pedro, you ride down this side; Ricardo, you skirt the outside. I shall keep to the middle. Walk your horses, for I shall go slowly." He slipped his carbine from its scabbard; the others did the same.

But Dave's plan did not commend itself to Ricardo; the old man's face puckered into an expression of doubt, and, removing his hat, he ran a hand over his wiry, short-cropped, white hair.

"*Señor,*" he protested, "I know something about these men, and they will not wait to learn that you are an officer. Perhaps I had better ride with you."

But Law declined the well-meant offer, and with a dubious shake of the head Ricardo rode away, while Dave guided Bessie Belle into the grove.

The mare seemed to know that something unusual was afoot. Perhaps some nervous tensity of her rider made itself felt, perhaps with equine sagacity she had understood from the first the nature of this scouting expedition. Dave was inclined to believe the latter—he had often averred that Bessie Belle knew quite as much as or more than he. At any rate she picked her way with admirable care, her hoofs made almost no sound upon the wet soil; only the complaint of the saddle leathers or the swish of a wet branch rose above the steady patter of the raindrops. It was not necessary to guide her; she selected the openings of her own free will, her small, sharp ears were alert, and her eyes searched the glades intently.

Dave smiled at this excess of caution and stroked Bessie Belle's wet neck encouragingly, whereupon she turned her head and it seemed to the rider that she nodded her complete understanding. Law could have kissed her.

X

A RANGER'S HORSE

ONWARD through the dense foliage the two friends wound. Now and then they stopped to listen, but the rain was heavy enough to drown all other noises. Encountering fresh tracks finally, Dave leaned from his saddle and studied them. What he saw caused him to push forward with no diminution of stealth.

He had gone perhaps half a mile when Bessie Belle raised her head, and he noted that her nostrils were working sensitively. A few yards farther on Law fancied that he could detect the smell of a wood fire. Almost without a signal from him the mare halted in her tracks until he had satisfied himself. Still farther along they came to a place where the brush was low, and there, rising through the tree-tops beyond, they saw a wavering plume of blue smoke.

The Ranger rode into sight of the branding-fire with his Winchester across his saddle-horn and his thumb upon the hammer; what followed came with almost the blinding suddenness of a lightning crash, though afterward the events of that crowded moment lingered as a clear-cut memory. First there was the picture of a sandy glade in the center of which burned a fire with branding-irons in it, and a spotted calf tied to a tree, but otherwise no sign of life. Then, without warning, Bessie Belle threw up her head in that characteristic trick of hers, and simultaneously Dave saw a figure rise out of the grass at his left with rifle leveled. The Ranger remembered afterward the odd foreshortening of the weapon and the crooked twist of the face behind it. With the first jerk of his horse's head his own gun had leaped to his shoulder—he was not conscious of having willed it to do so—and even as he pressed the trigger he beheld a jet of smoke spurt from the muzzle aimed at him. With the kick of his carbine he felt Bessie Belle give way—it seemed to Dave that he shot while she was sinking. The next instant his feet, still in the stirrups, were on the ground and his horse lay between them, motionless. That nervous fling of her head had saved Dave's life, for the rustler's bullet had shattered her skull in its flight, and she lay prone, with scarcely a muscular twitch, so sudden had been her end. The breath escaped slowly from her lungs; it was as if she heaved a lingering sigh; one leg contracted and then relaxed.

For a moment the Ranger was dazed. He stood staring down at his pet; then the truth engulfed him. He realized that he had ridden her to her death, and at the thought he became like a woman bereft of her child, like a lover who had seen his sweetheart slain.

A shout—it was a hoarse, inarticulate cry; a swift, maddened scrutiny that searched the sodden scene of the ambush; then he was down beside the mare, calling her name heartbrokenly, his arms around her neck, his face against her warm, wet, velvet hide.

Law knew that two men had entered the thicket, and therefore one still remained to be reckoned with, but he gave no thought to that. Nor did he rise to look after the grotesquely huddled figure that had been a cattle thief only a moment before—both he and his assailant had been too close to miss. From the corner of his eye he could see a pair of boot-soles staring at him out of the grass, and they told him there was no need for investigation. Near the body he heard a calf stirring, but he let it struggle.

Bessie Belle's bright eyes were glazing; she did not hear her lover's voice. Her muzzle, softer than any satin, was loose, her lips would never twitch with that clumsy, quivering caress which pleased her master so. One front hoof, washed as clean as agate, was awkwardly bent under her, the other had plowed a furrow in the soft earth as she sank, and against this leg her head lay tipped.

Don Ricardo and his son burst out of the brush from opposite directions almost at the same moment, to find the Ranger with his face buried in his horse's mane.

"*Caramba!* What is this?" The old man flung himself from the saddle and came running. "You are injured?"

Pedro, too, bent over the officer, his brown face pale with apprehension. "Mother of God!" breathed the latter. "It was a wild thing to do, to ride alone—"

"I'm all right," Law said, rising stiffly, whereupon both Mexicans voiced their relief.

"The saints be praised!"

"*Si!* What happened? There was a shot! Did you see nothing?"

Law jerked his head in the direction of the fallen man at his back, and Pedro uttered a loud cry.

"Look!" Father and son ran through the grass, then recoiled and broke into a jargon of oaths and exclamations.

Law followed them with his eyes. "Is he dead?" he inquired, coldly.

"God! Yes."

"Right in the mouth! The fellow was in hell before he realized it."

"See! It is as we thought, Pedro; one of Lewis's! Tse Tse! Tse! What a sight!"

"Who is he?" queried the officer.

"Pino Garza, one of the worst!" chimed the two Guzmans.

Ricardo was dancing in his excitement. "I told you that Lewis knew something. The other one got past me, but he rode like the devil, and I cannot shoot like—this."

"Wait!" exclaimed Pedro. "This is beyond my understanding. I heard but one shot from here, then after an instant my father's gun. And yet here is a dead horse and a dead man."

"This fellow and I fired at about the same instant," Dave explained, but even when he had related the history of the encounter his companions could scarcely believe that such quick shooting was possible.

It was difficult to secure a connected story from Ricardo, but he finally made it plain that at the first report the other thief had fled, exposing himself only long enough for the old man to take a quick shot in his direction. Ricardo had missed, and the miscreant was doubtless well away by this time. He had ridden a sorrel horse, that was all Ricardo could remember.

Law looked only briefly at the gruesome results of his marksmanship, then he turned back to the body of his beloved mare. Ricardo noticed at length that he was crying; as the Ranger knelt beside the dead thoroughbred the old Mexican whispered to his son:

"*Valgame Dios!* This is a strange fellow. He weeps like a woman. He must have loved that horse as a man loves his wife. Who can understand these Gringos?" After a time he approached cautiously and inquired: "What shall we do with this *hombre, señor?* Pedro has found his horse."

Law roused himself. With his own hands he gently removed Bessie Belle's saddle, bridle, and blanket, then he gave his orders.

"I'll take your horse, Ricardo, and you take—that fellow's. Get a wagon and move him to Jonesville."

"And you?"

"I'm going to follow that man on the sorrel."

The dead man's saddle was left beside the body; then when the exchange of mounts had been effected and all was ready, Law made a request that amazed both father and son.

"If I'm not back by morning, I want you to bury my mare." His voice broke; he turned away his face. "Bury her deep, Ricardo, so—the coyotes can't dig her up; right here where she fell. I'll be back to see that it's done right. Understand?"

"*Bueno!* I understand perfectly. She was a pretty horse. She was your—*bonita*, eh? Well, you have a big heart, *señor*, as a brave man should have. Everything shall be done as you wish; I give you my hand on it." Ricardo reached down and gripped Law's palm. "We will name our pasture for her, too, because it is plain you loved her dearly. So, then, until to-morrow."

Law watched his two friends ride away, then he wiped his Winchester and saw to his cinch. This done he raised Bessie Belle's head and kissed the lip that had so often explored his palm for sugar. With a miserable ache in his throat he mounted and rode off to pick up the trail of the man on the sorrel pony.

Fortunately this was not difficult, for the tracks of a running horse are plain in soft ground. Finding where his quarry had broken cover, Law set out at a lope.

The fellow had ridden in a wide semicircle at first, then, finding he was not pursued, he had slackened pace, and, in consequence, the signs became more difficult to follow. They seemed to lead in the direction of Las Palmas, which Dave judged must be fully twelve miles away, and when they continued to maintain this course the Ranger became doubly interested. Could it be, he asked himself, that his quarry would have the audacity to ride to the Austin headquarters? If so, his identification promised to become easy, for a man on a sorrel cow-pony was more than likely to be observed. Perhaps he thought himself secure and counted upon the assistance of some friend or confederate among the Las Palmas ranch-hands in case of pursuit. That seemed not unreasonable, particularly inasmuch as he could have no suspicion that it was a Ranger who was on his trail.

Dave lost the hoof-prints for a time, but picked them up again at the pasture gate a few miles farther on, and was able to trace them far enough to assure himself that his quarry was indeed headed for the Austin house and had no intention of swinging southward toward the Lewis headquarters.

By this time the rain had done its work, and to follow the tracks became a matter of guesswork. Night was coming on also, and Dave realized that at this rate darkness would find him far from his goal. Therefore he risked his own interpretation of the rider's intent and pushed on without pausing to search out the trail step by step. At the second gate the signs indicated that his man was little more than an hour ahead of him.

The prospect of again seeing the ruddy-haired mistress of Las Palmas stirred Law more deeply than he cared to admit. Alaire Austin had been seldom out of his thoughts since their first meeting, for, after the fashion of men cut off from human society, he was subject to insistent fancies. Dave had many times lived over those incidents at the water-hole, and for the life of him he could not credit the common stories of Alaire's coldness. To him, at least, she had appeared very human, and after they had once become acquainted she had been unaffected and friendly.

Since that meeting Dave had picked up considerable information about the object of his interest, and although much of this was palpably false, it had served to make her a still more romantic figure in his eyes. Alaire now seemed to be a sort of superwoman, and the fact that she was his friend, that something deep within her had answered to him, afforded him a keen satisfaction, the greater, perhaps, because of his surprise that it could be so. Nevertheless, he was uncomfortably aware that she had a husband. Not only so, but the sharp contrast in their positions was disagreeable to contemplate; she was unbelievably rich, and a person of influence in the state, while he had nothing except his health, his saddle, and his horse—

With a desperate pang Law realized that now he had no horse. Bessie Belle, his best beloved, lay cold and wet back yonder in the weeping mesquite. He found several cubes of sugar in his pocket, and with an oath flung them from him. Don Ricardo's horse seemed stiff-gaited and stubborn.

Dave remembered how Mrs. Austin had admired the mare. No doubt she would grieve at the fate that had befallen her, and that would give them something to talk about. His own escape would interest her, too, and—Law realized, not without some natural gratification, that he would appear to her as a sort of hero.

The mist and an early dusk prevented him from seeing Las Palmas itself until he was well in among the irrigated fields. A few moments later when he rode up to the outbuildings he encountered a middle-aged Mexican who proved to be Benito Gonzalez, the range boss.

Dave made himself known, and Benito answered his questions with apparent honesty. No, he had seen nothing of a sorrel horse or a strange rider, but he had just come in himself. Doubtless they could learn more from Juan, the horse-wrangler, who was somewhere about.

Juan was finally found, but he proved strangely recalcitrant. At first he knew nothing, though after some questioning he admitted the possibility that he had seen a horse of the description given, but was not sure. More pressure brought forth the reluctant admission that the possibility was almost a certainty.

"What horse was it?" Benito inquired; but the lad was non-committal. Probably it belonged to some stranger. Juan could not recollect just where or when he had seen the pony, and he was certain he had not laid eyes upon the owner.

"Devil take the boy! He's half-witted," Benito growled.

But Dave changed his tactics. "*Oiga!*" he said, sternly. "Do you want to go to jail?" Juan had no such desire. "Then tell the truth. Was the horse branded?"

"Yes."

"With what brand?"

Juan had not noticed.

"With the 'K.T.' perhaps?" That was the Lewis brand.

"Perhaps!"

"Where is it now?"

Juan insolently declared that he didn't know and didn't care.

"Oh, you don't, eh?" Law reached for the boy and shook him until he yelled. "You will make a nice little prisoner, Juanito, and we shall find a way to make you speak."

Gonzalez was inclined to resent such high-handed treatment of his underling, but respect for the Rangers was deep-rooted, and Juan's behavior was inexplicable.

At last the horse-boy confessed. He had seen both horse and rider, but knew neither. Mr. Austin and the stranger had arrived together, and the latter had gone on. That was the truth.

"*Bueno!*" Law released his prisoner, who slunk away rubbing his shoulder. "Now, Benito, we will find Mr. Austin."

A voice answered from the dusk: "He won't take much finding," and Ed Austin himself emerged from the stable door. "Well, what do you want?" he asked.

"You are Mr. Austin, I reckon?"

"I am. What d'you mean by abusing my help?" The master of Las Palmas approached so near that his threatening scowl was visible. "I don't allow strangers to prowl around my premises."

Amazed at this hostile greeting, Law explained in a word the reason for his presence.

"I don't know anything about your man. What d'you want him for, and who are you?"

Dave introduced himself. "I want him for stealing Guzman calves. I trailed him from where he and his partner cut into your south pasture."

Benito stirred and muttered an oath, but Austin was unmoved. "I reckon you must be a bad trailer," he laughed. "We've got no thieves here. What makes you think Guzman lost any calves?"

Dave's temper, never too well controlled at best, began to rise. He could not imagine why a person of Ed Austin's standing should behave in this extraordinary manner, unless perhaps he was drunk.

"Well, I saw the calves, and I left the fellow that was branding them with a wet saddle-blanket over his face."

"Eh? What's that?" Austin started, and Gonzalez uttered a smothered exclamation. "You killed him? He's dead?"

"Dead enough to skin. I caught him with his irons in the fire and the calves necked up in your pasture. Now I want his *compañero*."

"I—hope you don't think we know anything about him," Ed protested.

"Where's that man on the sorrel horse?"

Austin turned away with a shrug.

"You rode in with him," Dave persisted.

Ed wheeled quickly. "How do you know I did?"

"Your boy saw you."

The ranchman's voice was harsh as he said: "Look here, my friend, you're on the wrong track. The fellow

I was with had nothing to do with this affair. Would you know your man? Did you get a look at him?"

"No. But I reckon Don Ricardo could tell his horse."

"Humph!" Austin grunted, disagreeably. "So just for that you come prowling around threatening my help, eh? Trying to frame up a case, maybe? Well, it don't go. I was out with one of Tad Lewis's men."

"What was his name?" Dave managed to inquire.

"Urbina. He had a sorrel under him, but there are thousands of sorrel horses."

"What time did you meet him?"

"I met him at noon and—I've been with him ever since. So you see you're wrong. I presume your man doubled back and is laughing at you."

Law's first bewilderment had given place to a black rage; for the moment he was in danger of disregarding the reason for "Young Ed's" incivility and giving free rein to his passion, but he checked himself in time.

"Would you mind telling me what you and this Urbina were doing?" he inquired, harshly.

Austin laughed mockingly. "That's my business." said he.

Dave moistened his lips. He hitched his shoulders nervously. He was astonished at his own self-control, though the certainty that Austin was drunk helped him to steady himself. Nevertheless, he dared not trust himself to speak.

Construing this silence as an acknowledgment of defeat, Ed turned to go. Some tardy sense of duty, however, prompted him to fling back, carelessly:

"I suppose you've come a good ways. If you're hungry, Benito will show you the way to the kitchen." Then he walked away into the darkness, followed by the shocked gaze of his range boss.

Benito roused himself from his amazement to say, warmly: "*Si, compadre.* You will enjoy a cup of hot coffee."

But Law ground out fiercely: "I'm not used to kitchen hand-outs. I reckon I can chew my bridle-reins if I get too hungry." Walking to his horse, he vaulted into the saddle.

Benito laid a hand upon his thigh and apologized. "*Señor* Ed is a strange man. He is often like this, lately. You understand me? Will you come to my house for supper?"

"Thank you, but I think I'll ride on to Tad Lewis's and see Urbina."

At this the Mexican shook his head as if apprehensive of the result, but he said nothing more.

Law hesitated as he was about to spur out of the yard. "By the way," he ventured, "you needn't mention this to Mrs. Austin."

"She is not here," Gonzalez told him. "She has gone to La Feria to see about her affairs. She would not permit of this occurrence if she were at home. She is a very fine lady."

"Yes. Good night, Benito."

"Good night, *señor*."

When the Ranger had gone, Gonzalez walked slowly toward his house with his head bowed thoughtfully.

"It is very strange," he muttered. "How could Don Eduardo have met this Garza at noon when, with my own eyes, I saw him ride away from Las Palmas at three o'clock in the afternoon? It is very strange."

XI

JUDGE ELLSWORTH EXACTS A PROMISE

ON his way to the Lewis ranch Dave Law had a struggle with himself. He had earned a reputation as a man of violent temper, and the time was not long past when a fraction of the insult Ed Austin had offered him would have provoked a vigorous counterblast. The fact that on this occasion he had managed to restrain himself argued an increase of self-control that especially gratified him, because his natural tendency to "fly off the handle" had led more than once to regrettable results. In fact, it was only since he had assumed the duties of a peace officer that he had made a serious effort at self-government. A Ranger's work calls for patience and forbearance, and Dave had begun to realize the perils of his temperament. Normally he was a level-headed, conservative fellow, but when angered a thousand devils sprang up in him and he became capable of the wildest excess. This instability, indeed, had been largely to blame for his aimless roaming. Deep inside himself he knew that it was nothing but his headstrong temper which had brought on all his misfortunes and left him, well along in his thirties, a wanderer, with nothing he could call his own. As with most men of his turbulent disposition, fits of fury were usually followed by keen revulsions of feeling. In Dave these paroxysms had frequently been succeeded by such a sense of shame as to drive him from the scene of his actions, and in the course of his rovings he had acquired an ample store of regrets—bitter food for thought during the silent hours when he sat over his camp-fire or rode alone through the mesquite. His hatreds were keen and relentless, his passions wild, and yet, so far as he knew, they had never led him to commit a mean or a downright evil deed. He had killed men, to be sure, but never, he was thankful to say, in one of his moments of frenzy.

The killing of men in the fierce exultation of battle, the slaying of a criminal by an officer under stress of duty, even the taking of life under severe personal provocation, were acts that did not put one beyond the pale. Such blood washes off. But there were stains of a different kind.

Dave was glad that he had swallowed "Young Ed's" incivility, not only for his own sake, but for the sake of Alaire.

After all, he argued, it was barely possible that Ed had spoken the truth. There *were* many sorrel horses; the evidence of those rain-washed hoof-prints was far from conclusive; even the fact that Urbina belonged to the Tad Lewis outfit was no more than a suspicious circumstance. And yet, earnestly as he strove to convince himself of these possibilities, the Ranger could not down the conviction that the rancher had lied and that he himself was on the right track.

It was late when he arrived at his destination, but Lewis's house was dark, and it required some effort to awaken the owner. When Tad at last appeared, clad in undershirt and trousers, he greeted the Ranger with a leveled Winchester; but when Dave had made known his identity he invited him in, though with surly reluctance.

Lewis was a sandy-complexioned man of about forty, with colorless brows and a mean, shifty eye. Formerly a cowboy, he had by the exercise of some natural ability acquired a good property—and a bad reputation. Just how or why he had prospered was a mystery which his neighbors never tired of discussing.

Tad, it seemed, resented any interruption of his rest, and showed the fact plainly.

Yes, he employed a fellow named Urbina. What was wanted of him?

Law explained briefly.

"Why, he's one of my best men!" laughed the rancher. "He wouldn't steal nothing."

"Well, I had to shoot another good man of yours," Dave said, quietly.

Lewis fell back a step. "Which one? Who?" he inquired, quickly.

"Pino Garza." Dave told of the meeting at the branding-fire and its outcome. He was aware, meanwhile, that Lewis's family were listening, for behind a half-open bedroom door he could hear an excited whispering.

"Killed him the first shot, eh?" Tad was dumfounded. "Now I never thought Pino was that bad. But you never can tell about these Greasers, can you? They'll all steal if they get a chance. I let Pino go, 'bout a week back; but he's been hangin' around, aimin' to visit some of his relatives up in the brush country. It was probably one of them old Guzman saw. Anyhow, it couldn't of been Adolfo Urbina; he was over to Las Palmas all the afternoon."

"Did you send him there?"

"Sure. Ed Austin can tell you."

"Where is Urbina now?"

"I reckon he's asleep somewhere. "We'll dig him up and talk to him, if you say so."

"Good."

Tad's willingness to co-operate with the officer, now that he understood the situation, was in marked contrast to the behavior of Austin. In fact, his offer to help was almost too willingly given to suit Dave, who expected him to protest at being dragged out on such a night. No protest came, however; Lewis slipped into his boots and slicker, explaining meanwhile:

"I'm sorry this play came up, for I don't want folks to think I got a gang of thieves workin' for me."

But Adolfo Urbina was nowhere to be found. No one had seen him since about seven o'clock, nor could it be discovered where he was spending the night. Dave remembered that it had been about seven when he left Las Palmas, and ascertained, indirectly, that Tad had a telephone. On his way from Austin's Law had stopped at a *rancho* for a bite to eat, but he could forgive himself for the delay if, as he surmised, Urbina had been warned by wire of his coming.

"That's too bad, ain't it?" Lewis said. "But he'll be around again in the morning, and I'll get him for you. You leave it to me."

There was plainly nothing to do but accept this offer, since it could avail nothing to wait here for Urbina's return. Unless the fellow gave himself up, he probably could not be found, now that the alarm was given, without a considerable search—in view of which Dave finally remounted his borrowed horse and rode away in the direction of Jonesville.

It was after daylight when he dismounted stiffly at Blaze's gate. He was wet to the skin and bespattered with mud; he had been almost constantly in the saddle for twenty-four hours, and Don Ricardo's cow-pony was almost exhausted.

Blaze and Paloma, of course, were tremendously interested in his story.

"Say, now, that's quick work," the latter exclaimed, heartily. "You're some thief-buster, Dave, and if you'll just stay around here little calves can grow up with some comfort."

When Dave rode to Jonesville, after breakfast, he found that the body of his victim had been brought in during the night, and that the town was already buzzing with news of the encounter. During the forenoon Don Ricardo and his sons arrived, bringing additional information, which they promptly imparted to the Ranger. The Guzmans were people of action. All three of them had spent the night on horseback, and Pedro had made a discovery. On the day previous Garza had been seen riding in company with a man astride a sorrel pony, and this man had been recognized as Adolfo Urbina. Pedro's witness would swear to it.

Their distance from Las Palmas at the time when they had been seen together proved, beyond question, that unless Urbina had flown he could not have arrived at the place in question by noon, the hour Ed Austin had fixed.

This significant bit of information, however, Dave advised the Guzmans not to make public for the time being.

Toward midday Tad Lewis and three of his men arrived with the news that Urbina had left for Pueblo before they could intercept him.

"He's got a girl up there, and he's gone to get married," Tad explained. "I'm sure sorry we missed him."

Dave smiled grimly at the speaker.

"Are you sure he didn't cross to the other side?" he asked.

Lewis retorted warmly: "Adolfo's an all-right *hombre*, and I'll back him. So 'll Ed Austin. I guess me an' Ed are responsible, ain't we?" Some skeptical expression in his hearer's face prompted him to inquire, brusquely, "Don't you believe what I'm telling you about his goin' to Pueblo?"

"I guess he's gone—somewhere."

Tad uttered an angry exclamation. "Looks to me like you'd made up your mind to saddle this thing onto him whether he done it or not. Well, he's a poor Mexican.

but I won't stand to see him railroaded, and neither will 'Young Ed.'"

"No?"

"You heard me! Ed will alibi him complete."

Law answered, sharply: "You tell Ed Austin to go slow with his alibis. And you take this for what it's worth to you: I'm going to get all the cattle-rustlers in this county—*all* of them, understand?"

Lewis flushed redly and sputtered: "If you make this stick with Adolfo, nobody 'll be safe. I reckon Urbina's word is as good as old Ricardo's. Everybody knows what *he* is."

Later when Dave met the Guzmans, Ricardo told him, excitedly, "That horse Tad Lewis is riding is the one I saw yesterday."

"Are you sure?"

"Listen, *señor*. Men in cities remember the faces they see; I have lived all my life among horses, and to me they are like men. I seldom forget."

"Very well. Tad says Urbina has gone to Pueblo to get married, so I'm going to follow him, and I shall be there when he arrives."

"*Bueno!* Another matter"—Ricardo hesitated—"your *bonita*—the pretty mare. She is buried deep."

"I'm glad," said Dave. "I think I shall sleep better for knowing that."

Since the recent rain had rendered the black valley roads impassable for automobiles, Dave decided to go to Pueblo by rail, even though it was a roundabout way, and that afternoon found him jolting over the leisurely miles between Jonesville and the main line. He was looking forward to a good night's sleep when he arrived at the junction; but on boarding the north-bound through train he encountered Judge Ellsworth, who had just heard of the Garza killing, and of course was eager for details. The two men sat in the observation-car talking until a late hour.

Knowing the judge for a man of honor and discretion, Dave unburdened himself with the utmost freedom regarding his suspicions of Ed Austin.

Ellsworth nodded. "Yes, Ed has thrown in with the Rebel *junta* in San Antone, and Tad Lewis is the man they use to run arms and supplies in this neighborhood. That's why he and Ed are so friendly. Urbina is probably your cattle thief, but he has a hold over Ed, and so he rode to Las Palmas when he was pursued, knowing that no jury would convict him over Austin's testimony."

"Do you think Ed would perjure himself?" Dave asked.

"He has gone clean to the bad lately; there's no telling what he'll do. I'd hate to see you crowd him, Dave."

"They call you the best lawyer in this county because you settle so many cases out of court." The judge smiled at this. "Well, here's a chance for you to do the county a good turn and keep Ed Austin out of trouble."

"How?"

"The prosecuting attorney is a new man, and he wants to make a reputation by breaking up the Lewis gang."

"Well?"

"He intends to cinch Urbina, on Ricardo's and my testimony. You're a friend of Austin's; you'd better tip him to set his watch ahead a few hours and save himself a lot of trouble. The prosecuting attorney don't like Ed any too well. Understand?"

The judge pondered this suggestion for a moment. "'Young Ed' is a queer fellow. Once in a while he gets his neck bowed."

"So do I," Law declared, quietly. "He treated me like a hobo—sent me to the kitchen for a hand-out. That sticks. If I hadn't tamed down considerably these late years, I'd have—wound him up, right there."

From beneath his drooping lids Ellsworth regarded the Ranger curiously. "You *have* a bad temper, haven't you?"

"Rotten!"

"I know. You were a violent boy. I've often wondered how you were getting along. How do you feel when you're—that way?"

It was the younger man's turn to hesitate. "Well, I don't feel anything when I'm mad," he confessed. "I'm plumb crazy, I guess. But I feel plenty bad afterwards."

There was a flicker of the judge's eyelids.

Dave went on musingly: "I dare say it's inherited. They tell me my father was the same. He was—a killer."

"Yes. He was all of that."

"Say! *Was* he my father?"

Ellsworth started. "What do you mean?"

Dave lifted an abstracted gaze from the Pullman carpet. "I hardly know what I mean, Judge. But you've had hunches, haven't you? Didn't you ever *know* that something you thought was true wasn't true at all? Well, I never felt as if I had Frank Law's blood in me."

"This is interesting!" Ellsworth stirred and leaned forward. "Whatever made you doubt it, Dave?"

"Um-m. Nothing definite. That's what's so unsatisfactory. But, for instance, my mother was Mexican—"

"Spanish."

"All right. Am I Spanish? Have I any Spanish blood in me?"

"She didn't look Spanish. She was light-complexioned, for one thing. We both know plenty of people with a Latin strain in them who look like Anglo-Saxons. Isn't there anything else?"

"Nothing I can lay my finger on, except some kid fancies and—that hunch I spoke about."

Ellsworth sat back with a deep breath. "You were educated in the North, and your boyhood was spent at school and college, away from everything Mexican."

"That probably accounts for it," Law agreed; then his face lit with a slow smile. "By the way, don't tell Mrs. Austin that I'm a sort of college person. She thinks I'm a red-neck, and she sends me books."

Ellsworth laughed silently. "Your talk is to blame, Dave. Has she sent you *The Swiss Family Robinson?*"

"No. Mostly good, sad romances with an uplift—stories full of lances at rest, and Willie-boys in tin sweaters. Life must have been mighty interesting in olden days, there was so much loving and killing going on. The good women were always beautiful, too, and the villains never had a redeeming trait. It's a shame how human nature has got mixed up since then, isn't it? There isn't a 'my-lady' in all those books who could bust a cow-pony or run a ranch like Las Palmas. Say, Judge, how'd you like to have to live with a perfect lady?"

"Don't try your damned hog-Latin on me," chided the lawyer. "Alaire Austin's romance is sadder than any of those novels."

Dave nodded. "But she doesn't cry about it." Then he asked, gravely: "Why didn't she pick a real fellow, who'd kneel and kiss the hem of her dress and make a man of himself? That's what she wants—love and sacrifice, and lots of both. If I were Ed Austin I'd wear her glove in my bosom and treat her like those queens in the stories. Incense and adoration and—"

"What's the matter with you?" queried the judge.

"I guess I'm lonesome."

"Are you smitten with that girl?"

Dave laughed. "Maybe! Who wouldn't be? Why doesn't she divorce that bum—she could do it easy enough—and then marry a chap who could run Las Palmas for her?"

"A man about six feet three or four," acidly suggested the judge.

"That's the picture I have in mind."

"You think you could run Las Palmas?"

"I wouldn't mind trying."

"Really?"

"Foolish question number three."

"You must never marry," firmly declared the older man. "You'd make a bad husband, Dave."

"She ought to know how to get along with a bad husband, by this time."

Both men had been but half serious. Ellsworth knew his companion's words carried no disrespect; nevertheless, he said, gravely:

"If you ever think of marrying I want you to come to me. Promise?"

"I'll do it—on the way back from church."

"No. On the way to church. I'll have something to tell you."

"Tell me now," urged Law.

"There's nothing to tell, yet."

"I'll have no old ruffians kissing my brand-new bride," Dave averred.

The judge's face broadened in a smile. "Thank Heaven 'Young Ed' has the insides of a steel range, and so my pet client is safe from your mercenary schemes for some years. Just the same, if you ever do think of marrying—remember—I want you to come to me—and I'll cure you."

XII

LONGORIO MAKES BOLD

UPON her arrival at La Feria Alaire discovered that the Federal depredations had been even greater than she had feared. Not only had the soldiers taken a great many head of cattle, but they had practically cleared the ranch of horses, leaving scarcely enough with which to carry on the work.

Alaire's *hacienda* comprised a hundred thousand acres or more—lacking a thorough survey, she had never determined exactly how much land she really owned—and the property fronted upon a stream of water. In any other country it would have been a garden of riches, but agriculture was well-nigh impossible in northern Mexico. For several years now the instability of the government had precluded any plan of development, and, in consequence, the fields were out of cultivation and cattle grazed over the moist bottom lands, belly deep in grass. The entire ranch had been given over to pasture, and even now, after Alaire had sold off much of her stock because of the war, the task of accurately counting what remained required a longer time than she had expected, and her visit lengthened.

However, life in the roomy, fortress-like adobe house was pleasant enough. Dolores saw to her mistress's wants, and the regular inhabitants of La Feria were always extravagantly glad to make their employer welcome.

They were a simple, mirth-loving, industrious people, little concerned over the war, so long as they were unmolested, but obviously relieved to see Alaire because of their recent fright at the incursion of Longorio's troops.

In the work that now went forward José Sanchez took a prominent part. For once in his life he was a person of recognized importance. Not only was he the right hand of the owner of La Feria, but the favor of that redoubtable general, the hero of a hundred tales, rested upon his shoulders like a mantle. José's extravagant praises of the Federal commander, together with the daily presence of the military guard, forcibly brought home to the ranch-dwellers the fact that war was actually going on, and that Luis Longorio was indeed a man of flesh and blood, and no myth. This realization caused a ripple of excitement to stir the peons' placid lives.

And yet in the midst of his satisfaction Sanchez confessed to one trouble. He had expected to find his cousin, Panfilo, here, and the fact that nothing whatever had been heard from him filled him with great uneasiness. Of course he came to Alaire, who told him of seeing Panfilo at the water-hole on the day after her husband had discharged him; but that information gave José little comfort, since it proved nothing as to his cousin's present whereabouts. Alaire thought best not to tell him the full circumstances of that affair. Believing that Panfilo would turn up at La Feria in due time, she gave little heed to José's dark threats of vengeance for any injury to his relative.

The horse-breaker's concern increased as the days passed, and to the lieutenant and members of the guard he repeated his threats. Truly, he declared, if any evil had fallen upon his beloved cousin Panfilo, he, José, would exact a terrible reckoning, a revenge befitting a man of his character and a friend of Luis Longorio.

These soldiers, by the way, were something of a trial to Alaire, for they were ever in her way. She could not ride a mile over her own pastures without the whole martial squad following at her heels. Protest was unavailing; the lieutenant was mulishly stubborn. He had been ordered to keep the *señora* in sight at all times, so he said, and that ended the matter as far as he was concerned. His life and the lives of his six followers depended entirely upon her safety and happiness, for General Longorio was a man of his word.

Of course the lieutenant would not offend for the world—the object of his solicitude was at liberty to tread upon his worthless old carcass—but orders were orders, especially when they came from a certain source. He besought Alaire to exercise forbearance toward him, and, above all, to use the extremest caution in regard to her own well-being, for if aught befell her, if even a despicable rattlesnake should rise out of the grass to sting her—*caramba!* The *teniente*, in that case, would better destroy himself on the spot. Otherwise he would surely find himself, in a short time, with his back to a stone wall and his face to a firing-squad. That was the sort of man Longorio was.

The speaker wondered if Mrs. Austin really understood his chief's nature; how determined he was; how relentless he could be. General Longorio was a remarkable person. Opposition of any sort he could not brook. His discipline was rigorous and his punishments were severe; being utterly without fear himself, he insisted upon implicit obedience in others at whatever cost. For instance, during the battle of San Pedro, just south of here, a handful of Rebels had taken refuge in a small, one-roomed adobe house, where they resisted all efforts at dislodgment. Time and again the Federals had charged, only to meet a fire too murderous to face. The slaughter had been terrific. The lieutenant, veteran of many revolutions, vowed he had never seen a street so full of dead and wounded as the one in front of this house. Finally the soldiers had refused to advance again, and their captain had sent for a cannon. During the wait Longorio had ridden up.

"'Come! Make haste!' said he. 'That house obstructs my view.'"

Seeing that Alaire was deeply interested in this recital, the old lieutenant paused dramatically.

"Well, the *capitan* explained that an army was insufficient to take that house; that it meant death to all who approached. I was not present—God be praised!—but others told me what happened. General Longorio dismounted and embraced the *capitan*—he kissed him on the cheek, saying:

"'*Adios*, my dear good friend. I fear I have seen the last of you.'

"Then what? *Señora*, you would never guess." The speaker shook his head. "Longorio took two dynamite grenades, and, laughing like a boy, he ran forward before any one knew what he was about. It is nothing but the truth, *señora*, and he a general! This *capitan* loved him dearly, and so his bones turned to rope when the windows of that accursed house began to vomit fire and the dust began to fly. They say that the dead men in the street rose to their knees and crossed themselves—I only repeat what I was told by those who looked on. Anyhow, I have seen things quite as remarkable.

"Never was such courage, *señora!* God must have been moved to astonishment and admiration, for He diverted those bullets, every one. When our general came to the house he lit the fuses from his cigarette, then he cried, '*Viva Potosi!*' and hurled one bomb to the roof; the other he flung through a window into the very faces of his enemies. Those Rebels were packed in there like goats in a corral, and they say such a screaming you never heard. Doubtless many of them died from sheer terror:

the rest were blown through each other." The lieutenant breathed an admiring oath. "Truly, it must have been a superb spectacle."

"General Longorio must be very brave indeed," Alaire agreed.

"But wait! That is not all. After we had taken the town and destroyed what Rebel officers we found—"

"You mean—your prisoners?"

"*Si.* But there were only a few, and doubtless some of them would have died from their wounds. Well then, after that General Longorio called his old friend—that *capitan*—out before his troops and with his own hand he shot him. Then every fifth man among those who had refused to charge he ordered executed. It effected much good, I assure you."

For a moment Alaire and her companion rode in silence, but the *teniente* was not content with this praise of his leader.

"And yet General Longorio has another side to his character," he continued. "He can be as mild as the shyest *señorita*, and he possesses the most beautiful sentiments. Women are mad over him. But he is hard to please—strangely so. Truly, the lady who captivates his fancy may count herself fortunate." The old soldier turned in his saddle and, with a grace surprising in one of his rough appearance, removed his hat and swept Alaire a bow the unmistakable meaning of which caused her to start and to stammer something unintelligible.

Alaire was angry at the fellow's preseumption, and vexed with herself for showing that she understood his insinuation. She spurred her horse into a gallop, leaving him to follow as he could.

It was absurd to take the man's word seriously; indeed, he probably believed he had paid her a compliment. Alaire assured herself that Longorio's attentions were inspired merely by a temporary extravagance of admiration, characteristic of his nationality. Doubtless he had forgotten all about her by this time. That, too, was characteristic of Latin men. Nevertheless, the possibility that she had perhaps stirred him more deeply than she believed was disturbing—one might easily learn to fear Longorio. As a suitor he would be quite as embarrassing, quite as—dangerous as an enemy, if all reports were true.

Alaire tried to banish such ideas, but even in her own room she was not permitted entirely to forget, for Dolores echoed the *teniente's* sentiments.

In marked contrast to José Sanchez's high and confident spirits was the housekeeper's conviction of dire calamity. In the presence of these armed strangers she saw nothing but a menace, and considered herself and her mistress no more nor less than prisoners destined for a fate as horrible as that of the two beautiful sisters of whom she never tired of speaking. Longorio was a bloodthirsty beast, and he was saving them as prey for his first leisure moment—that was Dolores's belief. Abandoning all hope of ever seeing Las Palmas again, she gave herself up to thoughts of God and melancholy praises of her husband's virtues.

In spite of all this, however, Alaire welcomed the change in her daily life. Everything about La Feria was restfully un-American, from the house itself, with its bare walls and floors, its brilliantly flowering *patio*, and its primitive kitchen arrangements, to the black-shawled, barefooted Indian women and their naked children rolling in the dust. Even the timberless mountains that rose sheer from the westward plain into a tumbling purple-shadowed rampart were Mexican. La Feria was several miles from the railroad; therefore it could not have been more foreign had it lain in the very heart of Mexico rather than near the northern boundary.

In such surroundings, and in spite of faint misgivings, it was not strange that, after a few days, Alaire's unhappiness assumed a vaguely impersonal quality and that her life, for the moment, seemed not to be her own. Even the thought of her husband, Ed Austin, became indistinct and unreal. Then all too soon she realized that the purpose of her visit was accomplished and that she had no excuse for remaining longer. She was now armed with sufficient facts to make a definite demand upon the Federal government.

The lieutenant took charge of the return journey to the railroad, and the two women rode to the jingling accompaniment of metal trappings. When at last they were safely aboard the north-bound train, Alaire mildly teased Dolores about her recent timidity. But Dolores was not to be betrayed into premature rejoicing.

"Anything may happen at a moment's notice," she declared. "Something tells me that I am to meet a shocking fate. I can hear those ruffianly soldiers quarreling over me—it is what comes from good looks." Dolores mechanically smoothed the wrinkles from her dress and adjusted her hair. "Mark you! I shall kill myself first. I have made up my mind to that. But it is a great pity we were not born ugly."

Alaire could not forbear a smile, for she who thus resigned herself to the penalties of beauty had never been well favored, and age had destroyed what meager attractions she may have once possessed.

Dolores went on after a time. "My Benito will not long remain unmarried. He is like all men. More than once I have suspected him of making eyes at young women, and any girl in the country would marry him just for my fine silver coffee-pot and those spoons. There is my splendid silk mantilla, with fringe half as long as your arm, too. Oh, I have treasures enough!" She shook her head mournfully. "It is a mistake for a wife to lay up pretty things, since they are merely temptations to other women."

Alaire tried to reason her out of this mood. "Why should any one molest us? Who could wish us harm?" she asked.

"Ha! Did you see that general? He was like a drunken man in your presence; it was as if he had laid eyes upon the shining Madonna. I could hear his heart beating."

"Nonsense! In the first place, I am an old married woman."

Dolores sniffed. "*Vaya!* Old, indeed! What does he care for a husband? He only cares that you have long, bright hair, redder than rust, and eyes like blue flowers, and a skin like milk. An angel could not be so beautiful."

"Ah, Dolores, you flatterer! Seriously, though, don't you realize that we are Americans, and people of position? An injury to us would bring terrible consequences upon General Longorio's head. That is why he sent his soldiers with us."

"All the same," Dolores maintained stubbornly, "I wish I had brought that shawl and that silver coffee-pot with me."

The homeward journey was a repetition of the journey out; there were the same idle crowds, the same displays of filthy viands at the stopping-places, the same heat and dust and delays. Longorio's lieutenant hovered near, and José, as before, was news-gatherer. Hour after hour they crept toward the border, until at last they were again laid out on a siding for an indefinite wait.

The occasion for this was made plain when an engine drawing a single caboose appeared. Even before it had come to a pause a tall figure in spotless uniform leaped to the ground and strode to the waiting coaches. It was Luis Longorio. He waved a signal to the conductor, then swung aboard the north-bound train.

The general was all smiles as he came down the aisle and bowed low over Alaire's hand.

Dolores gasped and stiffened in her seat like a woman of stone.

"God be praised! You are safe and well!" said the new-comer. "I have blamed myself for allowing you to take this abominable journey! I have been in torment lest something befall you. Every night I have prayed that you might be spared all harm. When I received word that you were coming I made all speed to meet you."

"Dolores and I are greatly in your debt," Alaire told him.

"But you stayed so long!"

"There was more work than I thought. General, you have ruined me."

Longorio was pained; his face became ineffably sad. "Please! I beg of you," he entreated. "I have arranged for reparation of that miserable mistake. You shall see what I have done. With your own eyes you shall read the furious correspondence I have carried on with the minister. Together you and I shall manage a settlement, and you will find that I am a friend indeed!"

"I hope so."

"Have I not proved it? Am I not ready to give you my life?" the general queried, earnestly. "Fix the damages at your own figure and I shall see that you receive justice. If the government will not pay, I will. I have means; I am not a poor man. All I possess would be too little to buy your happiness."

"You embarrass me. I'm afraid you don't realize what you say." Alaire remained cool under the man's protestations. "I have lost more than a thousand head of cattle."

"We shall say two, three thousand, and the government will pay," Longorio asserted, brazenly. "I will vouch for your figures, and no one will question them, for I am a man of honor."

"No! All I want—"

"It is done. Let us say no more about the affair. *Señora*, I have thought of you every hour; the duties that held me in Nuevo Pueblo were like irksome chains. I was in madness. I would have flown to La Feria but—I could not."

"My husband will thank you for your great courtesy to me," Alaire managed to say.

But the mention of husbands was not agreeable to one of Longorio's sensitiveness, and his face betrayed a hint of impatience.

"Yes, yes," he agreed, carelessly. "*Señor* Austin and I must know each other better and become friends."

"That is hardly possible at present. When the war is over—"

"Bah! This war is nothing. I go where I please. You would be surprised to greet me at Las Palmas some day soon, eh? When you tell your husband what a friend I am he would be glad to see me, would he not?"

"Why—of course. But surely you wouldn't dare—"

"And why not? Las Palmas is close to the river, and my troops are in Romero, directly opposite. Mexico is not at war with your country, and when I am in citizen's clothes I am merely an ordinary person. I have made inquiries, and they tell me Las Palmas is beautiful, heavenly, and that you are the one who transformed it. I believe them. You have the power to transform all things, even a man's heart and soul. No wonder you are called 'The Lone Star.' But wait. You will see how constantly I think of you." Longorio drew from his pocket several photographs of the Austin ranch-house.

"Where did you get those?" Alaire asked in astonishment.

"Ah! My secret. See! They are badly worn already, for I keep them next my bosom."

"We entertain very few guests at Las Palmas," she murmured, uncomfortably.

"I know. I know a great deal."

"It would scarcely be safe for you to call; the country is full of Candeleristas—"

"Cattle!" said the officer, with a careless shrug. "Did not that great poet Byron swim an ocean to see a lovely lady? Well, I, too, am a poet. I have beautiful fancies: songs of love run through my mind. Those Englishmen know nothing of passion. Your American men are cold. Only a Mexican can love. We have fire in our veins, *señora*."

To these perfervid protestations Dolores listened with growing fright: her eyes were wide and they were fixed hypnotically upon the speaker; she presented much the appearance of a rabbit charmed by a serpent. But to Longorio she did not exist; she was a chattel, a servant, and therefore devoid of soul or intelligence, or use beyond that of serving her mistress.

Thinking to put an end to these blandishments, Alaire undertook to return the general's ring, with the pretense that she considered it no more than a talisman loaned her for the time being. But it was a task to make Longorio accept it. He was shocked, offended, hurt; he declared the ring to be of no value; it was no more than a trifling evidence of his esteem. But Alaire was firm.

"Your customs are different to ours," she told him. "An American woman is not permitted to accept valuable presents, and this would cause disagreeable comment."

At such a thought the general's finest sensibilities were wounded, but nothing, it seemed, could permanently dampen his ardor, and he soon proceeded to press his attentions with even more vehemence than before. He had brought Alaire candies of American manufacture, Mexican sweetmeats of the finest variety, a beautiful silken shawl, and at midday the grizzled *teniente* came with a basket of lunch containing dainties and fruits and vacuum bottles with hot and cold drinks.

When invited to share the contents, the general was plainly overjoyed, but he was so enthralled by his companion's beauty that he could eat but little.

It was a most embarrassing situation. Longorio kept Alaire for ever upon the defensive, and it sorely taxed her ingenuity to hold the conversation in safe channels. As the journey proceeded it transpired that the man had made use of his opportunities to learn everything about her, even to her life with Ed. His information was extensive, and his deductions almost uncanny in their correctness. He told her about Austin's support of the Rebel cause and her own daily doings at Las Palmas; he intimated that her unhappiness was almost more than he could bear.

This intimate knowledge and sympathy he seemed to regard as a bond that somehow united them. He was no longer a new acquaintance, but a close and loyal friend whose regard was deathless.

Undoubtedly the man had a way with him. He impressed people, and his magnetism was potent. Moreover, he knew the knack of holding what ground he gained.

It was an odd, unreal ride, through the blazing heat of the long afternoon. Longorio cast off all pretense and openly laid siege to the red-haired woman's heart—all without offering her the smallest chance to rebuff him, the slightest ground for open resentment, so respectful and guarded were his advances. But he was forceful in his way, and the very intensity of his desires made him incapable of discouragement. So the duel progressed—Alaire cool and unyielding, he warm, persistent, and tireless. He wove about her an influence as difficult to combat as the smothering folds of some flocculent robe or the strands of an invisible web, and no spider was ever more industrious.

When the train arrived at its destination his victim was well-nigh exhausted from the struggle. He helped her into a coach with the gentlest and gravest courtesy, and not until the vehicle rolled away did Alaire dare to relax. Through her fatigue she could still hear his soft farewell until the morrow, and realized that she had committed herself to his further assistance. His palms against hers had been warm, his adoring eyes had caressed her, but she did not care. All she wished now was to reach her hotel, and then her bed.

After a good night's rest, however, Alaire was able to smile at yesterday's adventure. Longorio did not bulk so large now; even these few hours had greatly diminished his importance, so that he appeared merely as an impulsive foreigner who had allowed a woman to turn his head. Alaire knew with what admiration even a moderately attractive American woman is greeted in Mexico, and she had no idea that this fellow had experienced anything more than a fleeting infatuation. Now that she had plainly shown her distaste for his outlaw emotions, and convinced him that they awoke in her no faintest response, she was confident that his frenzy would run its brief course and die. Meanwhile, it was not contrary to the standards of feminine ethics to take advantage of the impression she had made upon him and with his help push through a fair financial settlement of her loss.

Once back across the river, however, she discovered that there were obstacles to a prompt adjustment of her claim. The red tape of her own government was as nothing to that of Mexico. There were a thousand formalities, a myriad of maddening details to be observed, and they called for the services of an advocate, a notary, a *jefe politico*, a *jefe de armas*—officials without end. All of these worthies were patient and polite, but they displayed a malarial indifference to delay, and responsibility seemed to rest nowhere. During the day Alaire became bewildered, almost lost in the mazes of official procedure, and was half minded to telegraph for Judge Ellsworth. But that again meant delay, and she was beginning to long for home.

Longorio by no means shared her disappointment. On the contrary, he assured her they were making splendid progress, and he was delighted with her grasp of detail and her knowledge of business essentials. At his word all Nuevo Pueblo bowed and scraped to her, she was treated with impressive formality, and even the military guards at the various headquarters presented arms when she passed. The general's official business waited upon Alaire's convenience, and to spare her the necessity of the short ride back to American soil he arranged for her an elaborate luncheon in his quarters.

As on the day before, he assumed the privileges of a close friend, and treated his guest as a sort of fellow-conspirator working hand in hand with him for some holy cause.

XIII

DAVE LAW BECOMES JEALOUS

"YOU can never know what these two days have been for me," the general said as he and Alaire lingered over their meal. "They will afford me something to think about all my life. It is a delicious comfort to know that you trust me, that you do not dislike me. And you do not dislike me, eh?"

"Why, of course not. I have a great deal for which to thank you."

General Longorio fingered his wineglass and stared into it. "I am not like other men. Would to God I were, for then I could close my eyes and—forget. You have your great tragedy—it is old to you; but mine, dear lady, is just beginning. I can look forward to nothing except unhappiness." He sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry you are unhappy," Alaire parried. "Surely you have every pleasant prospect."

"It would seem so. I am young, rich, a hero, I serve my country in glorious fashion, but what is all that if there is no pretty one to care? Even the meanest peon has his woman, his heart's treasure. I would give all I have, I would forego my hope of heaven and doom myself to eternal tortures, for one smile from a pair of sweet lips, one look of love. I am a man of iron—yes, an invincible soldier—and yet I have a heart, and a woman could rule me."

"You say you have a heart." Alaire studied her *vis-à-*

vis curiously as he met her eyes with his mournful gaze. "How is it that I hear such strange stories about you, general?"

"What stories?"

"Stories—too terrible to mention. I wonder if they can be true."

"Lies, all of them!" Longorio asserted.

"For instance, they tell me that you shoot your prisoners?"

"Of course!" Then, at her shocked exclamation, he explained: "It is a necessity of war. Listen, *señora!* We have twelve million Indians in Mexico and a few selfish men who incite them to revolt. Everywhere there is intrigue, and nowhere is there honor. To war against the government is treason, and treason is punishable by death. To permit the lower classes to rise would result in chaos, black anarchy, indescribable outrages against life and property. There is but one way to pacify such people—exterminate them! Mexico is a civilized nation; there is no greater in the world; but she must be ruled with an iron hand. Soldiers make rulers. I am still a young man, and—at present there is but one other capable of this gigantic task. For the time being, therefore, I permit myself to serve under him, and—I salute him. *Viva Potosi!*" The speaker lifted his glass and drank. "Madero was a wicked believer in spells and charms; he talked with the dead. He, and those who came after him, fired the peons to revolt and despoiled our country, leaving her prone and bleeding. We of the *Cientificos* have set ourselves to stop her wounds and to nourish her to life again. We shall drive all traitors into the sea and feed them to the sharks. We shall destroy them all, and Mexico shall have peace. But I am not a bloodthirsty man. No, I am a poet and a lover at heart. As great a patriot as I am, I could be faithless to my country for one smile from the woman I adore."

Alaire did not color under the ardent glance that went with this declaration. She deliberately changed the subject.

"This morning while we were in the office of the *jefe de armas*," she said, "I saw a poor woman with a baby—she was scarcely more than a child herself—whose husband is in prison. She told me how she had come all the way from the country and is living with friends, just to be near him. Every day she goes to the *carcel*, but is denied admission, and every day she comes to plead with the *jefe de armas* for her husband's life. But he will not see her, and the soldiers only laugh at her tears."

"A common story! These women and their babies are very annoying," observed the general.

"She says that her husband is to be shot."

"Very likely! Our prisons are full. Doubtless he is a bad man."

"Can't you do something?"

"Eh?" Longorio lifted his brows in the frankest inquiry.

"That poor girl with her little, bare, brown-eyed baby was pitiful." Alaire leaned forward with an earnest appeal in her face, and her host smiled.

"So? That is how it is, eh? What is her name?"

"Inez Garcia. The husband's name is Juan."

"Of course. These *peladors* are all Juans. You would like to appear as an angel of mercy, eh? Your heart is touched?"

"Deeply."

"*Bastante!* There is no more to be said." Longorio rose and went into the next room where were certain members of his staff. After a time he returned with a paper in his hand, and this he laid before Alaire. It was an order for the release of Juan Garcia. "The *salvo conducto* which will permit Juan and his Inez and their

Juanito to return to their farm is being made out," he explained. "Are you satisfied?"

Alaire looked up wonderingly. "I am deeply grateful. You overwhelm me. You are—a strange man."

"Dear lady, I live to serve you. Your wish is my law. How can I prove it further?" As he stood beside her chair the fervor of his gaze caused her eyes to droop and a faint color to come into her cheeks. She felt a sudden sense of insecurity, for the man was trembling; the evident desire to touch her, to seize her in his arms, was actually shaking him like an ague. What next would he do? Of what wild extravagance was he not capable? He was a queer mixture of fire and ice, of sensuality and self-restraint. She knew him to be utterly lawless in most things, and yet toward her he had shown scrupulous restraint. What possibilities were in a man of his electric temperament, who had the strength to throttle his fiercest longings?

The strained, throbbing silence that followed Longorio's last words did more to frighten the woman than had his most ardent advances.

After a time he lifted Alaire's hand; she felt his lips hot and damp upon her flesh; then he turned and went away with the document.

When he reappeared he was smiling. "These Garcias shall know who interceded for them. You shall have their thanks," said he.

"No, no! It is enough that the man is free."

"How now?" The general was puzzled. "What satisfaction can there be in a good deed unless one receives public credit and thanks for it? I am not like that."

He would have lingered indefinitely over the table, but Alaire soon rose to go, explaining:

"I must finish my disagreeable task now, so that I can go home to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" her host cried in dismay. "No, no! You must wait—"

"My husband is expecting me."

This statement was a blow; it seemed to crush Longorio, who could only look his keen distress.

As they stepped out into the street Alaire was afforded that treat which Longorio had so thoughtfully arranged for her. There in the gutter stood Inez Garcia with her baby in her arms, and beside her the ragged figure of a young man, evidently her Juan. The fellow was emaciated, his face was gaunt and worn and frightened, his feet were bare even of sandals, the huge peaked straw hat which he clutched over his breast was tattered, and yet in his eye there was a light.

They had waited patiently, these Garcias, heedful of Longorio's orders, and now they burst into a torrent of thanks. They flung themselves to their knees and kissed the edge of Alaire's dress. Their instructions had been plain, and they followed them to the letter, yet their gratitude was none the less genuine for being studied. The little mother's hysteria, for instance, could not have been entirely assumed, and certainly no amount of rehearsals could have taught the child to join his cries so effectively to his parents'. Between them all they made such a racket as to summon a crowd, and Dolores, who had also awaited her mistress, was so deeply stirred that she wept with them.

General Longorio enjoyed this scene tremendously, and his beaming eyes expressed the hope that Alaire was fully satisfied with the moment. But the Garcias, having been thoroughly coached, insisted upon rendering full measure of thanks, and there seemed to be no way of shutting them off until the general ordered them to their feet.

"That is enough!" he declared. "*Hombre*, you are free, so go about your business and fight no more with those accursed rebels."

Juan, of course, was ready at this moment to fight for any one he was told to fight for, particularly Longorio himself, and he so declared. His life was at the service of the benefactor who had spared him; his wife and baby lived only to bless the illustrious general.

"They look very poor," said Alaire, and opened her purse; but Longorio would not permit her to give. Extracting a large roll of paper money from his own pocket, he tossed it, without counting, to Juan, and then when the onlookers applauded he loudly called to one of his officers, saying:

"*Oiga!* Give these good friends of mine two horses, and see that they are well cared for. Now, Juan," he addressed the dazed countryman, "I have one order for you. Every night of your life you and your pretty wife must say a prayer for the safety and happiness of this beautiful lady who has induced me to spare you. Do you promise?"

"We promise!" eagerly cried the pair.

"Good! See that you keep your word. On the day that you forget for the first time Luis Longorio will come to see you. And then what?" He scowled at them fiercely.

"We will not forget," the Garcias chorused.

There was a murmur from the onlookers; some one cried: "*Viva Longorio!*"

The general bowed smilingly; then, taking Alaire's arm, he waved the idlers out of his path with a magnificent gesture.

When, later in the day, Mrs. Austin came to say good-by and thank the Mexican for his courtesies, he humbly begged permission to pay his respects that evening at her hotel, and she could not refuse.

As the coach went bouncing across the international bridge, Dolores said, spitefully: "It will take more than the pardon of poor Juan Garcia to unlock Heaven for that bandit. He is the wickedest man I ever met—yes, probably the wickedest man in the world."

"He has been kind to us."

"Bah! He has a motive. Do you notice the way he looks at you? It is enough to damn him for all eternity."

Upon her arrival at the hotel Alaire received an agreeable surprise, for as her vehicle paused at the curb David Law stepped forward, hat in hand.

"What bloodthirsty business brings you to Pueblo?" she queried, when they had exchanged greetings.

Law smiled at her. "I came to offer free board and lodging to a poor Greaser. But he ain't here. And you, ma'am?"

Alaire briefly outlined the reasons that had taken her to La Feria and the duties that had kept her busy since her return, while Dave nodded his understanding. When, however, he learned that she was counting upon General Luis Longorio's aid in securing justice, his expression altered. He regarded her with some curiosity as he inquired:

"Isn't Longorio the very man who robbed you?"

"Yes."

"And now he offers to square himself?"

"Precisely. You don't seem to put much faith in him."

"Mexicans are peculiar people," Law said, slowly. "At least we consider them peculiar—probably because they are different to us. Anyhow, we don't understand their business methods or their habits of mind; even their laughter and their tears are different to ours, but—from my experience with them I wouldn't put much confidence in this Longorio's word. I say this, and I'm supposed to have a little Mexican blood in me."

During this brief conversation they had entered the hotel, and now the lobby idlers took quick cognizance of Mrs. Austin's presence. The lanky, booted Ranger excited no comment, for men of his type were common here; but Alaire was the heroine of many stories and the object of a wide-spread curiosity; therefore she received open stares and heard low whisperings. Naturally resenting this attention, she gave her hand to Law more quickly than she would have done otherwise.

"I hope we shall see each other again," she murmured.

"That's more'n likely; I'm located in your neighborhood now," he informed her. "I'm leaving for Jonesville in the morning."

"By train?"

"No'm. I'm goin' to follow the river road if I can get an automobile."

Mindful of the Ranger's courtesy to her on their previous meeting, Alaire said: "Won't you go with us? We intend to start early."

"I'd love to, ma'am—but I'll have to make a few inquiries along the line."

"Good! It is a large car and"—she smiled at him—"if we have tire trouble I may need your help. José, my man, is a splendid horse-breaker, but he seems to think a tire tool is some sort of a fancy branding-iron. His mechanical knowledge is limited to a bridle-bit and a cinch, and I'm almost certain he believes there is something ungodly about horseless wagons."

Dave was nearly speechless with delight, and when the mistress of Las Palmas had gone up-stairs he felt inclined to pinch himself to see if he were dreaming. He had pursued a fruitless quest during the past few days, and his resentment had grown as he became certain that Tad Lewis had sent him on a wild-goose chase; but the sight of Alaire miraculously restored his good spirits, and the prospect of a long, intimate ride in her company changed the whole trend of his thoughts. His disappointment at not seeing her upon his visit to Las Palmas had only served to enhance his memories of their first meeting, and time, now, had deepened his interest tenfold. Yes, she was "The Lone Star," the *estrella brillante* of his empty sky.

When the supper-hour came he managed by carefully watching the dining-room to time his meal with Mrs. Austin's. He even ventured to hope that they might share the same table, but in this he was disappointed. However, from where he sat he could see her profile and worship her to his heart's content, and when she favored him with a smile and a nod he was happy.

All without his knowledge, Dave realized, this woman had secured an amazing hold over him. He had thought a great deal about her, of course, but his thoughts had been idle, and it had required this second encounter to make him know the truth. Now, however, there could be no doubt about his feelings; he was more than romantically interested, the mere sight of her had electrified him. The discovery distressed him, and he very properly decided that the affair should end here, since it could lead to nothing except disappointment.

But who can govern a wayward fancy? One moment Law promised himself to see no more of this married woman; the next he wondered how she would occupy the evening, and ventured to hope that he might have a chance to talk with her.

After supper, however, she was nowhere to be found. When his first chagrin had passed he decided that this was exactly as it should be. He didn't like to see women make themselves conspicuous in hotels.

At the time of this story relations between the United States and the established government of Mexico were at such high tension that a hostility had sprung up between the troops fronting each other along the Rio Grande, and in consequence their officers no longer crossed the boundary, even when off duty. It created a flurry of suppressed excitement, therefore, when Luis Longorio, the autocrat of the Potosista forces, boldly crossed the bridge, traversed the streets of Pueblo, and entered the Hamilton Hotel.

From his seat in the lobby Law heard the general inquire for Mrs. Austin, and then saw him ascend in the direction of the parlor. What the devil could Longorio want with "The Lone Star" at such an hour? the Ranger asked himself. Why should he presume to call upon her unless—he was interested? Mexican officers, in these parlous times, were not given to social courtesies, and Longorio's reputation was sufficiently notorious to render his attentions a cause for gossip under any circumstances.

Dave rose and strolled restlessly about the hotel. A half-hour passed and Longorio did not reappear; an hour dragged by, and then Dave took occasion to go to his room. A glance through the open parlor door showed the foreigner in closest conversation with Mrs. Austin. They were laughing; they were alone; even Dolores was nowhere to be seen.

When Dave returned to his big rocking-chair he found it uncomfortable; he watched the clock anxiously; he chewed several cigars viciously before realizing that he was jealous—yes, madly, unreasonably jealous.

So! His divinity was not as unapproachable as he had imagined. Doubtless Longorio was mad over her, which explained the fellow's willingness to help her exact reparation from his government. Fine doings for a respectable married woman! It was wrong, scandalous, detestable!

After a time Dave rose impatiently. What had come over him, anyhow? He must be crazy to torture himself in this fashion. What went on up-stairs certainly was none of his business, and he had better far amuse himself. In accordance with this excellent reasoning, he went to a picture-show. But he could not become interested. The flat images on the screen failed to divert him, and the only faces he saw were those of Luis Longorio and the lone mistress of Las Palmas.

Had Dave only known the truth, he would have gained a grim comfort from it, for Alaire Austin was not enjoying herself this evening. Her caller stayed on interminably and she became restive under the flow of his conversation. For some reason or other Longorio was not the romantic figure he had been; in his citizen's clothes he was only a dandified Mexican gallant like any number of others. The color was gone from the picture; this quixotic guerrilla hero, this elegant Ruy Blas, was nothing more than a tall, olive-skinned foreigner whose ardor was distasteful. Longorio was tiresome.

XIV

JOSÉ SANCHEZ SWEARS AN OATH

ON this same evening a scene of no little significance was taking place at Las Palmas. Ed Austin was entertaining callers, and these were none other than Tad Lewis and Adolfo Urbina.

The progress of events during the last few days had shaped this conference, for, as Dave had forecast during his conversation with Judge Ellsworth, the local prosecuting attorney saw in the Guzman cattle case an opportunity to distinguish himself, and was taking action accordingly. He had gathered considerable evidence against Urbina, and was exerting himself to the utmost for an indictment. He had openly declared that the testimony of Ricardo Guzman and his other witnesses would convict the suspect, and the fact that his politics were opposed to Ed Austin's complicated matters still further. It was the unwelcome news of all this which had brought Tad Lewis and his Mexican helper to Las Palmas under cover of darkness. Having gone over the circumstances in detail, Lewis concluded:

"We're depending on you, Ed. You got to stand pat."

But Austin was lukewarm. He had experienced a change of heart, and the cause appeared when he read aloud a letter that day received from Judge Ellsworth, in which the judge told of his meeting with Dave Law, and the Ranger's reasons for doubting Ed's word.

"I've got to take water," "Young Ed" told his visitors, "or I'll get myself into trouble." Then querulously he demanded of Adolfo: "Why in hell did you come here, anyhow? Why didn't you keep to the chaparral?"

Adolfo shrugged. "I thought you were my friend."

"Sure!" Tad agreed. "Urbina's been a friend to you, now you got to stick to him. We got to hang together, all of us. My evidence wouldn't carry no weight; but there ain't a jury in South Texas that would question yours. Adolfo done the right thing."

"I don't see it," Ed declared, petulantly. "What's the use of getting me into trouble? There's the river; they can't follow you across."

But Urbina shook his head.

"You know he can't cross," Tad explained. "His people would shoot him if he ever went to Mexico."

"Well, he'll be caught if he stays here. You daren't send that damned Ranger on another blind trail. If Adolfo can't go south he'll have to go north."

"Not on your life," affirmed Lewis. "If he runs it 'll prove his guilt and look bad for me. I'm the one they're after, and I don't stand any too good, as you know. You got to go through with this, Ed."

"I won't do it," Austin asserted, stubbornly. "I won't be dragged into the thing. You've no business rustling stock, anyhow. You don't have to."

Urbina exhaled a lungful of cigarette smoke and inquired, "You won't help me, eh?"

"No, I won't."

"Very well! If I go to prison you shall go, too. I shall tell all I know and we shall be companions, you and I."

Austin's temper rose at the threat. "Bah!" he cried, contemptuously. "There's nothing against me except running arms, and the embargo is off now. It's a joke, anyhow. Nobody was ever convicted, even when the embargo was in effect. Why, the government winks at anybody who helps the Rebels."

"Oh, that is nothing!" Urbina agreed; "but you would not wish to be called a cattle thief, eh?"

"What d'you mean?"

"You knew that the stealing went on."

"Huh! I should say I did. Haven't I lost a lot of horses?"

Lewis interposed, impatiently: "Say! Suppose Adolfo tells what he knows about them horses? Suppose he tells how you framed it to have your own stock run across, on shares, so's you could get more money to go hifalutin' around San Antone without your wife knowing it? I reckon you wouldn't care to have that get out."

"You can't prove it," growled "Young Ed."

"Oh! I reckon it can be proved all right," confidently asserted Lewis.

"Nobody'd believe such a thing."

"Folks are ready to believe 'most anything about you. Your wife would believe it. Ain't Las Palmas in her name, and don't she give you so much a month to spend? If them ain't facts, you lied to me."

"Yes!" Urbina supplemented. "I can swear to all that. And I can swear also that you knew about those calves the other day."

"What!" Ed started.

"Why not? We were together; your own people saw us. Well, then, if you would steal your wife's horses, why would you not steal your neighbor's cattle? The relatives of poor Pino Garza—God rest his soul!—will bear me out. I have arranged for that. Suppose I tell the jury that there were three of us in that pasture of yours, instead of two? What then? I would be lonely in prison without a good *compadre* to bear me company." Urbina grinned in evil triumph.

"This is the damnedest outrage I ever heard of," gasped "Young Ed." "It's a fairy story—"

"Prove it," chuckled Lewis. "The prosecuting attorney'd eat it up, Ed. It sounds kind of crazy, but you can't ask Adolfo to take to the brush and live like a *javelin* just for your sake, when you could square him with a word."

There was a moment or two of silence, during which the visitors watched the face of the man whose weakness they both knew. At last Ed Austin ventured to say, apologetically:

"I'm willing to do almost anything to help Adolfo, but —they'll make a liar of me if I take the stand. Isn't there some other way out?"

"I don't know of any," said Lewis.

"Money'll square anything," Ed urged, hopefully, whereupon Urbina waved his cigarette and nodded.

"This Ricardo Guzman is the cause of it all. He is a bad man."

"No doubt of that," Lewis agreed. "He's got more enemies than I have. If he was out of the way there wouldn't be nothin' to this case, and the country'd be a heap better off, too."

"What about that other witness?" Ed queried.

"If Ricardo were gone—if something should happen to him"—Urbina's wicked face darkened—"there would be no other witness. I would see to that."

The color receded from Ed Austin's purple cheeks, and he rose abruptly. "This is getting too strong for me," he cried. "I won't listen to this sort of talk. I won't be implicated in any such doings."

"Nobody's goin' to implicate you," Tad told him. "Adolfo wants to keep you out of trouble. There's plenty of people on both sides of the river that don't like Guzman any better'n we do. Me an' Adolfo was talkin' it over on the way up."

"Well, you can talk it over some more, but I'm going for a drink," Ed declared, and left the room, nervously mopping his face. He knew only too well the character of his two visitors; he had learned much about Tad Lewis during the past few months, and, as for the Mexican, he thought the fellow capable of any crime. At this moment Ed bitterly regretted his acquaintance with these neighbors, for both men knew more about his affairs than he cared to have made public. He was angry and resentful at Tad for taking sides against him, and more than a little fearful of Adolfo's enmity if he refused assistance. The owner of Las Palmas still retained a shred of self-respect, a remnant of pride in his name; he did not consider himself a bad man. He was determined now to escape from this situation without loss of credit, no matter what the price—if escape were possible—and he vowed earnestly to himself that hereafter he would take ample pains never to become similarly involved.

Austin remained out of the room for some time; when he returned his visitors appeared to have reached some determination.

"I reckon we can fix things if you'll help," Lewis announced.

"And that's just what I won't do," Ed impatiently declared. "Do you think I'm going to be tangled up in a—murder? I've got nothing against Don Ricardo."

"Who said anything about murder? Things ain't like they was when your father owned Las Palmas; he done his share of killin', but nowadays there's too dam' much law layin' around loose. All you've got to do is give me about a thousand dollars."

"What for?" Ed asked, suspiciously.

"So's we can handle ourselves. It's up to you to do something, ain't it?"

Austin demurred. "I haven't that much that I can lay hands on," he said, sullenly. "I'm broke. And, anyhow, I don't see what good it 'll do."

"You better dig it up, somehow, just for your own sake."

The two men eyed each other for a moment; then

Austin mumbled something about his willingness to try, and left the room for a second time. The money which Alaire kept on hand for current expenses was locked in her safe, but he knew the combination.

It was with an air of resignation, with a childish, half-hearted protest, that he counted out the desired amount into Lewis's hand, salving his conscience with the statement: "I'm doing this to help Adolfo out of his trouble, understand? I hope it 'll enable you to square things."

"Maybe it will and maybe it won't," sneered Lewis. "Anyhow, I ain't scared of tryin'. I got the guts to make a battle, even if you haven't."

Ed Austin was greatly relieved when his unwelcome callers rode away; as he composed himself for sleep, an hour later, he refrained from analyzing too deeply the motives behind this forced loan, and refused to speculate too long upon the purpose to which it might be put. The whole occurrence was unfortunate. Ed Austin sincerely hoped he had heard the last of it.

José Sanchez made use of the delay at Pueblo to institute further inquiries regarding his missing cousin, but nowhere could he find the slightest trace. Panfilo had set out to ride to this point and thence to La Feria, but the last seen of him had been at the water-hole, one day's ride from the home ranch. At that point the earth had opened and swallowed him. If he were alive why had he not written to his sweetheart, Rosa?

José swore an oath that he would learn the truth if it required his whole lifetime, and, if it should turn out that his sainted relative had indeed met with foul play—well! José told his friends they could judge, by looking at him, the sort of man he was. He proudly displayed Longorio's revolver, and called it his cousin's little avenger. The weapon had slain many; it had a duty still to perform, so he said.

José intended to confide his purpose to Mrs. Austin, but when it came time to start for Las Palmas there was a fourth passenger in the automobile, and he was obliged to hold his tongue for the moment.

A motor trip along the lower Rio Grande would prove a novel and not altogether agreeable experience to the average automobilist, for there are few improved roads and the rest offer many difficulties, not the least of which are frequent fords, some deep, some shallow. So it was that Alaire considered it necessary to make an early start.

In spite of the unhealthy fancies that Dave Law had taken to bed with him, he arose this morning in fine spirits and with a determination to put in a happy day. Alaire, too, was in good humor and expressed her relief at escaping from everything Mexican.

"I haven't seen a newspaper for ages, and I don't know what is going on at Jonesville or anywhere else," she confided.

Dave told her of the latest developments in the Mexican situation, the slow but certain increase of tension between the two governments, and then of home happenings. When she asked him about his own doings, he informed her of the affair which had brought him to Pueblo.

Of course all three of his companions were breathlessly interested in the story of Pino Garza's death; Dolores and José did not allow a word to escape them.

"So they cut our fence and ran the calves into our pasture to brand!" Alaire said. "It's time somebody like you came to Jonesville, Mr. Law."

"*Caramba!* It required bravery to ride alone into that *rincon*," José declared. "I knew Pino Garza well, and he could shoot like the devil."

"You said your horse saved your life," Mrs. Austin went on. "How do you mean?" When Dave had explained, she cried, quickly, "You weren't riding—Bessie Belle?"

"Yes. She's buried where she dropped."

"Oh-h!" Alaire's exclamation was eloquent of pity, and Law smiled crookedly.

"I've been right lonesome since she went away. 'Most every day I find myself stealing sugar for her, the way I used to do. See!" He fumbled in the pocket of his coat and produced some broken lumps. "Probably you don't understand how a man gets to love his horse. Now we used to talk to each other, just like two people. Of course, I did most of the talking, but she understood. Why, ma'am, I've awakened in the night to find her standing over me and my cheek wet where she'd kissed it. She'd leave the nicest grass just to come and visit with me."

Alaire turned a quick glance upon the speaker to find his face set and his eyes miserable. Impulsively she laid her hand upon his arm, saying:

"I know how you must feel. Do you know what has always been my dearest wish? To be able to talk with animals; and to have them trust me. Just think what fun it would be to talk with the wild things and make friends of them. Oh, when I was a little girl I used to dream about it!"

Law nodded his vigorous appreciation of such a desire. "Dogs and horses *sabe* more than we give them credit for. I've learned a few bird words, too. You remember those quail at the water-hole?"

"Oh yes."

Dave smiled absent-mindedly. "There's a wonderful book about birds—one of the keenest satires ever written, I reckon. It's about a near-sighted old Frenchman who was cast away on a penguin island. He saw the big birds walking around and thought they were human beings."

"How did you happen to read Anatole France?" Alaire asked, with a sharp stare of surprise.

The Ranger stirred, but he did not meet her eyes.

"Well," said he, "I read 'most anything I can get. A feller meets up with strange books just like he meets up with strange people."

"Not books like—that." There was a brief silence. "Mr. Law, every now and then you say something that makes me think you're a—rank impostor."

"Pshaw!" said he. "I know cowboys that read twice as good as I do."

"You went to school in the East, didn't you?"

"Yes'm."

"Where?" The man hesitated, at which she insisted, "Where?"

Dave reluctantly turned upon her a pair of eyes in the depths of which there lurked the faintest twinkle. "Cornell," said he.

Alaire gasped. After a while she remarked, stiffly, "You have a peculiar sense of humor."

"Now don't be offended," he begged of her. "I'm a good deal like a chameleon; I unconsciously change my color to suit my surroundings. When we first met I saw that you took me for one thing, and since then I've tried not to show you your mistake."

"Why did you let me send you those silly books? Now that you have begun to tell the truth, keep it up. How many of them had you read?"

"We-ll, I hadn't read any of them—lately."

"How disagreeable of you to put it that way!" The car leaped forward as if spurred by Alaire's mortification. "I wondered how you knew about the French Revolution. 'That Bastilly was some calaboose, wasn't it'?" She quoted his own words scornfully. "I dare say you've had a fine laugh at my expense?"

"No!" gravely denied the man.

They had come to an arroyo containing a considerable stream of muddy water, and Law was forced to get out to plug the carburetor and stop the oil-intakes to the crankcase. This done, Alaire ran the machine through on the self-starter. When José's "*Carambas!*" and Dolores's shrieks had subsided, and they were again under way, Mrs. Austin, it seemed, had regained her good humor.

"You will receive no more of my favorite authors," she told Dave, spitefully. "I'll keep them to read myself."

"You like knights and—chivalry and such things, don't you?"

"Chivalry, yes. In the days when I believed in it I used to cry over those romances."

"Don't you still believe in chivalry?"

Alaire turned her eyes upon the questioner, and there were no girlish illusions in them. "Do you?" she queried, with a faint curl of her lip.

"Why—yes."

She shook her head. "Men have changed. Nowadays they are all selfish and sordid. But—I shouldn't generalize, for I'm a notorious man-hater, you know."

"It seems to me that women are just as selfish as men—perhaps more so—in all but little things."

"Our definitions of 'little things' may differ. What do you call a big thing?"

"Love! That's the biggest thing in the world," Law responded, promptly.

"It seems to be so considered. So you think women are selfish in love?" He nodded, whereupon she eyed him speculatively. "Let us see. You are a man—how far would you go for the woman you loved?"

"The limit!"

Mrs. Austin frowned at this light-seeming answer. "I suppose you mean that you would make any sacrifice?"

"Yes; that's it."

"Would you give up the woman herself, if you considered it your duty?"

"No. There couldn't be any duty higher than love—

to my way of thinking. But you shouldn't take me as a specimen. I'm not a good representative of my sex."

"I think you are a very good one," Alaire said, quietly, and Dave realized that no flattery was intended. Although he was willing to talk further on this subject, Mrs. Austin gave him no opportunity of airing his views. Love, it appeared, was a thing she did not care to discuss with him on their footing of semi-intimacy.

Despite the rough roads, they made fair time, and the miles of cactus and scrawny brush rolled swiftly past. Occasionally a lazy jack-rabbit ambled out of his roadside covert and watched them from a safe distance; now and then a spotted road-runner raced along the dusty ruts ahead of them. The morning sun swung higher, and by midday the metal of the automobile had become as hot as a frying-pan. They stopped at various goat-ranches to inquire about Adolfo Urbina, and at noon halted beside a watercourse for lunch.

Dave was refilling the radiator when he overheard José in conversation with Mrs. Austin.

"Nowhere a trace!" the horse-breaker was saying. "No one has seen him. Poor Rosa Morales will die of a broken heart."

Alaire explained to her guest: "José is worried about his cousin Panfilo. It seems he has disappeared."

"So! You are Panfilo's cousin?" Dave eyed the Mexican with new interest.

"*Si!*"

"You remember the man?" Alaire went on. "He was with that fellow you arrested at the water-hole."

"Oh yes. I remember him." With steady fingers Dave shook some tobacco into a cigarette-paper. He felt Alaire's eyes upon him, and they were eloquent of inquiry, but he did not meet them.

José frowned. "No one at La Feria has seen him, and in Pueblo there was not a word. It is strange."

"Panfilo was in bad company when I saw him." Law finished rolling his cigarette and lit it, still conscious of Alaire's questioning gaze. "He may have had trouble."

"He was a good man," the horse-breaker asserted. "If he is dead—" The Mexican's frown deepened to a scowl.

"What then?"

José significantly patted the gift revolver at his hip. "This little fellow will have something to say."

Dave looked him over idly, from head to heel, then murmured: "You would do well to go slow, *compadre*. Panfilo made his own quarrels."

"We were like brothers, and I do not know of any quarrels. But I shall find out. It begins to look bad for somebody. After he left that *charco* there is—nothing. Where did he go? Whom did he encounter? Rosa will ask me those questions. I am not given to boasting, *señor*, but I am a devilish bad man in my way."

XV

THE TRUTH ABOUT PANFILO

NOTHING more was said during the luncheon, but when Alaire had finished eating and her two employees had begun their meal, she climbed the bank of the arroyo ostensibly to find a cool spot. Having succeeded, she called to Dave:

"There is a nice breeze up here."

The Ranger's face set; rising slowly, he climbed the bank after her. When they stood face to face in the shade of a gnarly oak-tree, Alaire asked him point-blank:

"Where is Panfilo Sanchez?"

Dave met her eyes squarely; his own were cold and hard. "He's where he dropped at my second shot," said he.

He could hear his companion's sharp inhalation. He did not flinch at the look she turned upon him.

"Then—you killed him?"

"Yes'm!"

"God! He was practically unarmed! What do you call—such an act?"

Dave's lips slowly whitened, his face became stony. He closed his eyes, then opened them upon hers. "He had it coming. He stole my horse. He took a chance."

Mrs. Austin turned away. For a time they were silent and Dave felt himself pitilessly condemned.

"Why didn't you tell me at the time?" she asked. "Why didn't you report it?"

"I'll report it when you give me permission."

"I—? What—?" She wheeled to face him.

"Think a moment. I can't tell half the truth. And if I tell everything it will lead to—gossip."

"Ah! I think I understand. Mr. Law, you can be insulting—"

For the first time the man lost muscular control of his features; they twitched, and under their tan his cheeks became a sickly yellow.

"You've no right to say that," he told her, harshly. "You've plumb overstepped yourself, ma'am, and—I reckon you've formed quite a wrong opinion of me and of the facts. Let me tell you something about that killing and about myself, so you'll have it all straight before you bring in your verdict. You say Panfilo was unarmed, and you call it—murder. He had his six-shooter and he used it; he had the darkness and the swiftest horse, too. He intended to ambush me and release his companion, but I forced his hand; so it ain't what *I'd* call murder. Now about myself: Panfilo isn't the first man I've killed, and he may not be the last, but I haven't lost any sleep over it, and I'd have killed him just as quick if I hadn't been an officer. That's the kind of man I am, and you may as well know it. I—"

"You are utterly ruthless."

"Yes'm!"

"You left him there without burial."

Law shrugged impatiently. "What's the difference? He's there to stay; and he's just as dead under the stars as he'd be under the sand. I'd rather lie facing the sky than the grass roots."

"But—you must have known it would get out, sometime. This puts both of us in a very bad light."

"I know. But I stood on my cards. I'd have preferred to report it, but—I'd keep still again, under the same circumstances. You seem to consider that an insult. If it is, I don't know how to compliment you, ma'am."

Alaire pondered this statement briefly before saying, "You have a strange way of looking at the affair—a strange, careless, unnatural way, it seems to me."

"Perhaps that's the fault of my training. I'm not what you would consider a nice person; the death of Panfilo Sanchez means nothing whatever to me. If you can grasp that fact, you'll see that your own reputation weighed heavier in my mind than the lives of a dozen Mexicans—or whites, for that matter. People know me for what I am, and—that may have had something to do with my decision."

"I go anywhere, everywhere. No one has ever had the effrontery to question my actions," Alaire told him, stiffly.

"And I don't aim to give 'em a chance." Dave was stubborn.

There was another interval of silence.

"You heard what José said. What are you going to do?"

Dave made a gesture of indifference. "It doesn't greatly matter. I'll tell him the truth, perhaps."

Such an attitude was incomprehensible to Alaire and brought an impatient frown to her brow. "You don't seem to realize that he will try to revenge himself."

"You might warn him against any such foolishness. José has some sense."

The woman looked up curiously. "Don't you know how to be afraid? Haven't you any fear?" she asked.

Dave's gray eyes were steady as he answered: "Yes'm! I'm afraid this thing is going to spoil our friendship. I've been desperately afraid, all along, that I might have hurt your reputation. Even now I'm afraid, on your account, to make public Panfilo Sanchez's death. Yes'm, I know what it is to be afraid."

"I presume the law would hold you blameless," she said, thoughtfully.

"If there was any doubt about that it would be another matter entirely. A Ranger can get away with a heap more than killing a Mexican. No! It's up to you to say what I shall do."

"Let me think it over. José mustn't know to-day, that's certain."

"I'm in your hands."

They returned to the automobile in silence, but as they took their seats Dave said:

"You're tired, ma'am. Won't you let me drive?"

"Can you?"

When he smiled his answer, Alaire was only too glad to give up the wheel, for her nerves were indeed unsteady and she was grateful for an opportunity to think out the best course to pursue in this unexpected difficulty. Later, as she listened to Law's inconsequential talk with Dolores and José, and watched the way he handled the car, she marveled at his composure. She wondered if this man could have a heart.

It became evident to Dave, as the afternoon progressed, that they would be very late in arriving at Las Palmas; for although he drove as rapidly as he dared over such roads, the miles were long and the going heavy. They were delayed, too, by a mishap that held them back for an hour or two, and he began to fear that his hostess would feel in duty bound to insist upon his spending the night at her home. To accept, after his clash with Ed Austin, was of course impossible, and he dreaded another explanation at this particular crisis.

That a crisis in their relations had arisen he felt sure. He had tried to make plain his attitude of mind toward the killing of Panfilo Sanchez, and the wisdom of his course thereafter, but he doubted if Alaire understood the one or agreed with the other. Probably she considered him inhuman, or, what was worse, cowardly in attempting to avoid the consequences of his act. And yet he could not explain his full anxiety to protect her good name without confessing to a deeper interest in her than he dared. And his interest was growing by leaps and bounds. This woman fascinated him; he was infatuated —bewitched by her personality. To be near her affected him mentally and physically in a way too extraordinary to analyze or to describe. It was as if they were so sympathetically attuned that the mere sound of her voice set his whole being into vibrant response, where all his life he had lain mute. She played havoc with his resolutions, too, awaking in him the wildest envy and desire. He no longer thought of her as unattainable; on the contrary, her husband's shortcomings seemed providential. Absurd, impossible ways of winning her suggested themselves. To risk a further estrangement, therefore, was intolerable.

But as if his thoughts were telepathic messages, she did the very thing he feared.

"We won't be in before midnight," she said, "but I'll send you to Jonesville in the morning."

"Thank you, ma'am—I'll have to go right through."

"I'll get you there in time for business. We've gained a reputation for inhospitableness at Las Palmas that I want to overcome." In spite of their recent clash, in spite of the fact that this fellow's ruthlessness and indifference to human life shocked her, Alaire was conscious of her obligation to him, and aware also of a growing friendship between them which made the present situation all the more trying. Law was likable, and he inspired her with a sense of security to which she had long been a stranger. "Mr. Austin ought to know," she added, "about this—matter we were discussing, and I want him to meet you."

"He has!" Dave said, shortly; and at his tone Alaire looked up.

"So!" She studied his grim face. "And you quarreled?"

"I'd really prefer to go on, ma'am. I'll get to Jonesville somehow."

"You refuse—to stay under his roof?"

"That's about it."

"I'm sorry." She did not ask for further explanation.

Evening came, bringing a grateful coolness, and they drove through a tunnel of light walled in by swiftly moving shadows.

The windows of Las Palmas were black, the house silent, when they arrived at their journey's end; Dolores was fretful, and her mistress ached in every bone. When José had helped his countrywoman into the house Alaire said:

"If you insist upon going through you must take the car. You can return it to-morrow."

"And—about Panfilo?" Dave queried.

"Wait. Perhaps I'll decide what is best to do in the mean time. Good night."

Law took her extended hand. Alaire was glad that he did not fondle it in that detestable Mexican fashion of which she had lately experienced so much; glad that the grasp of his long, strong fingers was merely firm and friendly. When he stepped back into the car and drove off through the night she stood for some time looking after him.

Blaze Jones had insisted that Dave live at his house, and the Ranger had accepted the invitation; but as it was late when the latter arrived at Jonesville, he went to the hotel for a few hours' rest. When he drove his borrowed machine up to the Jones house, about breakfast-time, both Blaze and Paloma were delighted to see him.

"Say, now! What you doing rolling around in a gasoline go-devil?" the elder man inquired, and Law was forced to explain.

"Why, Mrs. Austin must have experienced a change of heart!" exclaimed Paloma. "She never gave anybody a lift before."

Blaze agreed. "She's sure poisonous to strangers." Then he looked over the car critically. "These automobiles are all right, but whenever I want to go somewhere and get back I take a team of hay-burners. Mules don't puncture. The first automobile Paloma had nearly scared me to death. On the road to Brownsville there used to be a person who didn't like me—we'd had a considerable unpleasantness, in fact. One day Paloma and I were lickety-splittin' along past his place when we had a blow-out. It was the first one I'd ever heard, and it fooled me complete—comin' right at that particular turn of the road. I sure thought this party I spoke of had cut down on me, so I r'ared up and unlimbered. I shot out three window-lights in his house before Paloma could explain. If he'd been in sight I'd have beefed him then and there, and saved six months' delay. No, gas-buggies are all right for people with strong nerves, but I'm tuned too high."

"Father has never learned to drive a car without yelling 'Gee' and 'Haw,'" laughed Paloma. "And he thinks he has title to the whole road, too. You know these Mexicans are slow about pulling their wagons to one side. Well, father got mad one day, and when a team refused him the right of way he whipped out his revolver and fired."

Blaze smiled broadly. "It worked great. And believe me, them Greasers took to the ditch. I went through like a hot wind, but I shot up sixty-five ca'tridges between here and town."

"Why didn't Mrs. Austin ask you to stay all night at Las Palmas?" the girl inquired of Dave.

"She did."

"Wonderful!" Paloma's surprise was evidently sincere. "I suppose you refused because of the way Ed treated you? Well, I'd have accepted just to spite him. Tell me, is she nice?"

"She's lovely."

This vehement declaration brought a sudden gleam of interest into the questioner's eyes.

"They say she has the most wonderful gowns and jewels, and dresses for dinner every night. Well"—Paloma tossed her head—"I'm going to have some nice clothes, too. You wait!"

"Now don't you start riggin' yourself up for meals," Blaze said, warningly. "First thing I know you'll have me in a full-dress suit, spillin' soup on my shirt." Then to his guest he complained, feelingly: "I don't know what's come over Paloma lately; this new dressmaker has plumb stampeded her. Somebody'd ought to run that feline out of town before she ruins me."

"She is a very nice woman," complacently declared the daughter; but her father snorted loudly.

"I wouldn't associate with such a critter."

"My! But you're proud."

"It ain't that," Blaze defended himself. "I know her husband, and he's a bad *hombre*. He backed me up against a waterin'-trough and told my fortune yesterday. He said I'd be married twice and have many children. He told me I was fond of music and a skilled performer on the organ, but melancholy and subject to catarrh, Bright's disease, and ailments of the legs. He said I loved widows, and unless I was poisoned by a dark lady I'd live to be eighty years old. Why, he run me over like a pet squirrel lookin' for moles, and if I'd had a gun on me I'd have busted him for some of the things he said. 'A dark lady!' That's his wife. I give you warnin', Paloma, don't you ask her to stay for meals. People like them are dangerous."

"You're too silly!" said Paloma. "Nobody believes in such things."

"They don't, eh? Well, he's got all of Jonesville walkin' around ladders, and spittin' through crossed fingers, and countin' the spots on their nails. He interprets their dreams and locates lost articles."

"Maybe he can tell me where to find Adolfo Urbina?" Dave suggested.

"Humph! If he can't, Tad Lewis can. Say, Dave, this case of yours has stirred up a lot of feelin' against Tad. The prosecutin' attorney says he'll sure cinch him and Urbina, both. One of Lewis's men got on a bender the other night and declared Adolfo would never come to trial."

"What did he mean?"

"It may have been *mescal* talk, but witnesses sometimes have a way of disappearin'. I wouldn't put anything past that gang."

Not long after breakfast Don Ricardo Guzman appeared at the Jones house and warmly greeted his two friends. To Dave he explained:

"Last night I came to town, and this morning I heard you had returned, so I rode out at once. You were unsuccessful?"

"Our man never went to Pueblo."

"Exactly. I thought as much."

"He's probably safe across the river."

But Ricardo thought otherwise. "No. Urbina deserted from this very Colonel Blanco who commands the forces at Romero. He would scarcely venture to return to Federal territory. However, I go to meet Blanco to-day, and perhaps I shall discover something."

"What takes you over there?" Blaze inquired.

"Wait until I tell you. *Señor* David, here, brings me good fortune at every turn. He honors my poor thirsty *rancho* with a visit and brings a glorious rain; then he destroys my enemies like a thunderbolt. No sooner is this done than I receive from the Federals an offer for fifty of my best horses. *Caramba!* Such a price, too. They are in a great hurry, which looks as if they expected an attack from the Candeleristas at Matamoras. I hope so. God grant these traitors are defeated. Anyhow, the horses have gone, and to-day I go to get my money, in gold."

"Who's going with you?" asked Law.

Ricardo shrugged. "Nobody. There is no danger."

Blaze shook his head. "They know you are a red-hot Rebel. I wouldn't trust them."

"They know, also, that I am an American, like you gentlemen," proudly asserted Guzman. "That makes a difference. I supported the Liberator—God rest his soul!—and I secretly assist those who fight his assassins, but so does everybody else. I am receiving a fine price for those horses, so it is worth a little risk. Now, *señor*," he addressed himself to the Ranger, "I have brought you a little present. Day and night my boys and I have worked upon it, for we know the good heart you have. It was finished yesterday. See!" Ricardo unwrapped a bundle he had fetched, displaying a magnificent bridle of plaited horsehair. It was cunningly wrought, and lavishly decorated with silver fittings. "You recognize those hairs?" he queried. "They came from the mane and tail of your *bonita*."

"Bessie Belle!" Law accepted the handsome token, then held out his hand to the Mexican. "That was mighty fine of you, Ricardo. I— You couldn't have pleased me more."

"You like it?" eagerly demanded the old man. "That is good. I am repaid a thousandfold. Your sentiment is like a woman's. But see! I am famous for this work, and I have taught my boys to use their fingers, too. That mare will always guide you now, wherever you go. And we handled her gently, for your sake."

Dave nodded. "You're a good man, Ricardo. We're going to be friends."

Guzman's delight was keen, his grizzled face beamed, and he showed his white teeth in a smile. "Say no more. What is mine is yours—my house, my cattle, my right hand. I and my sons will serve you, and you must come often to see us. Now I must go." He shook hands heartily and rode away, waving his hat.

"There's a good Greaser," Blaze said, with conviction, and Dave agreed, feelingly:

"Yes! I'd about go to hell for him, after this." Then he took the bridle in for Paloma to admire.

XVI

THE RODEO

IT was with a feeling of some reluctance that Dave drove up to Las Palmas shortly after the lunch hour, for he had no desire to meet "Young Ed." However, to his relief, Austin did not appear, and inasmuch as Alaire did not refer to her husband in any way, Dave decided that he must be absent, perhaps on one of his notorious sprees.

The mistress of the big ranch was in her harness, having at once assumed her neglected duties. She came to welcome her caller in a short khaki riding-suit; her feet were encased in tan boots; she wore a mannish felt hat and gauntlet gloves, showing that she had spent the morning in the saddle. Dave thought she looked exceedingly capable and business-like, and not less beautiful in these clothes; he feasted his eyes covertly upon her.

"I expected you for luncheon," she smiled; and Dave could have kicked himself. "I'm just going out now. If you're not in too great a hurry to go home you may go with me."

"That would be fine," he agreed.

"Come, then. I have a horse for you." As she led the way back toward the farm buildings she explained: "I'm selling off a bunch of cattle. Benito is rounding them up and cutting out the best ones."

"You keep them, I reckon."

"Always. That's how I improve the grade. You will see a splendid herd of animals, Mr. Law—the best in South Texas. I suppose you're interested in such things."

"I'd rather watch a good herd of stock than the best show in New York," he told her.

When they came to the corrals, an intricate series of pens and chutes at the rear of the outbuildings, Law beheld two thoroughbred horses standing at the hitching-rail.

"I'm proud of my horses, too," said Alaire.

"You have reason to be." With his eyes alight Dave examined the fine points of both animals. He ran a caressing hand over them, and they recognized in him a friend.

"These beauties were raised on Kentucky blue grass. Brother and sister, aren't they?"

"Yes. Montrose and Montrosa are their names. The horse is mine, the mare is yours." Seeing that Dave did not comprehend the full import of her words, she added: "Yours to keep, I mean. You must make another Bessie Belle out of her."

"*Mine?* Oh—ma'am!" Law turned his eyes from Alaire to the mare, then back again. "You're too kind. I can't take her."

"You must."

Dave made as if to say something, but was too deeply embarrassed. Unable to tear himself away from the mare's side, he continued to stroke her shining coat while she turned an intelligent face to him, showing a solitary white star in the center of her forehead.

"See! She is nearly the same color as Bessie Belle."

"Yes'm! I—I want her, ma'am; I'm just sick from wanting her, but—won't you let me buy her?"

"Oh, I wouldn't sell her." Then, as Dave continued to yearn over the animal, like a small boy tempted beyond his strength, Alaire laughed. "I owe you something, Mr. Law, and a horse more or less means very little to me."

He yielded; he could not possibly continue his resistance, and in his happy face Alaire took her reward.

The mare meanwhile was doubtfully nosing her new master, deciding whether or not she liked him; but when he offered her a cube of sugar her uncertainties disappeared and they became friends then and there. He talked to her, too, in a way that would have won any female heart, and it was plain to any one who knew horses that she began to consider him wholly delightful. Now, Montrosa was a sad coquette, but this man seemed to say, "Rosa, you rogue, if you try your airs with me I will out-flirt you." Who could resist such a person? Why, the touch of his hands was positively thrilling. He was gentle, but masterful, and—he had a delicious smell. Rosa felt that she understood him perfectly, and was enraptured to discover that he understood her. There was some satisfaction in knowing such a man.

"You *do* speak their language," Alaire said, after she had watched them for a few minutes. "You have bewitched the creature." Dave nodded silently, and his face was young. Then half to herself the woman murmured, "Yes, you have a heart."

"I beg pardon?"

"Nothing. I'm glad you like her."

"Do you mind if I call her something else than Rosa, just to myself?"

"Why, she's yours! Don't you like the name?"

"Oh yes! But—see!" Dave laid a finger upon Montrosa's forehead. "She wears a lone star, and I'd like to call her that—The Lone Star."

Alaire smiled in tacit assent; then when the two friends had completely established their intimacy she mounted her own horse and led the way to the round-up.

Dave's unbounded delight filled the mistress of Las

Palmas with the keenest pleasure. He laughed, he hummed snatches of songs, he kept up a chatter addressed as much to the mare as to his companion, and under it Montrosa romped like a tomboy. It was gratifying to meet with such appreciation as this; Alaire felt warm and friendly to the whole world, and decided that out of her abundance she must do more for other people.

Of course Dave had to tell of Don Ricardo's thoughtful gift, and concluded by saying, "I think this must be my birthday, although it doesn't fit in with the calendar."

"Don Ricardo has his enemies, but he is a good-hearted old man."

"Yes," Dave agreed. Then more gravely: "I'm sorry I let him go across the river." There was a pause. "If anybody harms him I reckon I'll have a feud on my hands, for I'm a grateful person."

"I believe it. I can see that you are loyal."

"I was starved on sentiment when I was little, but it's in me bigger than a skinned ox. They say gratitude is an elemental, primitive emotion—"

"Perhaps that's why it is so rare nowadays," said Alaire, not more than half in jest.

"You find it rare?" Dave looked up keenly. "Well, you have certainly laid up a store of it to-day."

Benito and his men had rounded up perhaps three thousand head of cattle when Alaire and her companion appeared, and they were in the process of "cutting out." Assembled near a flowing well which gave life to a shallow pond, the herd was held together by a half-dozen horsemen who rode its outskirts, heading off and driving back the strays. Other men, under Benito's personal direction, were isolating the best animals and sending them back to the pasture. It was an animated scene, one fitted to rouse enthusiasm in any plainsman, for the stock was fat and healthy; there were many calves, and the incessant, rumbling complaint of the herd was blood-stirring. The Las Palmas cowboys rode like centaurs; doubling, dodging, yelling, and whirling their ropes like lashes; the air was drumming to swift hoof-beats, and over all was the hoarse, unceasing undertone from countless bovine throats. Out near the grub-wagon the *remuda* was grazing, and thither at intervals came the perspiring horsemen to change their mounts.

Benito, wet, dusty, and tired, rode up to his employer to report progress.

"*Dios!* This is hot work for an old man. We will never finish by dark," said he, whereupon Law promptly volunteered his services.

"Lend me your rope, Benito, till I get another *caballo*."

"Eh? That Montrosa is the best cutting horse on Las Palmas."

But Dave shook his head vigorously. "I wouldn't risk her among those gopher-holes." He slid out of his seat and, with an arm around the mare's neck, whispered into her ear, "We won't have any broken legs and broken hearts, will we, honey girl?" Rosa answered by nosing the speaker over with brazen familiarity; then when he had removed her equipment and turned away, dragging her saddle, she followed at his heels like a dog.

"*Diablo!* He has a way with horses, hasn't he?" Benito grinned. "Now that Montrosa is wilder than a deer."

Alaire rode into the herd with her foreman, while Dave settled his loop over a buckskin, preparatory to joining the cowboys.

The giant herd milled and eddied, revolving like a vast pool of deep, swift water. The bulls were quarrelsome, the steers were stubborn, and the wet cows were distracted. Motherless calves dodged about in bewilderment. In and out of this confusion the cowboys rode, following the animals selected for separation, forcing them out with devious turnings and twistings, and then running them madly in a series of breakneck crescent dashes over flats and hummocks, through dust and brush, until they had joined the smaller herd of choice animals which were to remain on the ranch. It was swift, sweaty, exhausting work, the kind these Mexicans loved, for it was not only spectacular, but held an element of danger. Once he had secured a pony Dave Law made himself one of them.

Alaire sat her horse in the heart of the crowding herd, with a sea of rolling eyes, lolling tongues, and clashing horns all about her, and watched the Ranger. Good riding she was accustomed to; the horses of Las Palmas were trained to this work as bird dogs are trained to theirs; they knew how to follow a steer and, as Ed Austin boasted, "turn on a dime with a nickel to spare." But Law, it appeared, was a born horseman, and seemed to inspire his mount with an exceptional eagerness and intelligence. In spite of the man's unusual size, he rode like a feather; he was grace and life and youth personified. Now he sat as erect in his saddle as a swaying reed; again he stretched himself out like a whip-lash. Once he had begun the work he would not stop.

All that afternoon the cowboys labored, and toward sundown the depleted herd was driven to the water. It moved thither in a restless, thirsty mass; it churned the shallow pond to milk, and from a high knoll, where Alaire had taken her stand, she looked down upon a vast undulating carpet many acres in extent formed by the backs of living creatures. The voice of these cattle was like the bass rumble of the sea, steady, heavy-droning, ceaseless.

Then through the cool twilight came the drive to the next pasture, and here the patience of the cowboys was taxed to the utmost, for as the stronger members of the herd forged ahead, the wearied, worried, littlest members fell behind. Their joints were limber, and their legs unsteady; one and all were orphaned, too, for in that babel of sound no untrained ears could catch a mother's low. A mile of this and the whole rear guard was composed of plaintive, wet-eyed little calves who made slower and slower progress. Some of them were stubborn and risked all upon a spirited dash back toward the homes they were leaving and toward the mothers who would not answer. It took hard, sharp riding to run them down, for they fled like rabbits, bolting through prickly-pear and scrub, their tails bravely aloft, their stiff legs flying. Others, too tired and thirsty to go farther, lay down and refused to budge, and these had to be carried over the saddle-horn until they had rested. Some hid themselves cunningly in the mesquite clumps or burrowed into the coarse *sagauista* grass.

But now those swarthy, dare-devil riders were as gentle as women; they urged the tiny youngsters onward with harmless switches or with painless blows from loose-coiled riatas; they picked them up in their arms and rode with them.

Once through the gate and safe inside the restraining pasture fence, the herd was allowed to settle down. Then began a patient search by outraged mothers, a series of mournful quests that were destined to continue far into the night; endless nosings and sniffings and caressings, which would keep up until each cow had found her own, until each calf was butting its head against maternal ribs and gaining that consolation which it craved.

A new moon was swinging in the sky as Alaire and Dave rode back toward Las Palmas. The dry, gray grass was beginning to jewel with dew; the paths were ribbons of silver between dark blots of ink where the bushes grew. Behind rose the jingle of spurs and bridles, the creak of leather, the voices of men. It was an hour in which to talk freely, an environment suited to confidences, and Dave Law was happier than he had been for years. He closed his eyes to the future, he stopped his ears to misgivings; with a song in his heart he rode at the stirrup of the woman he adored.

How or when Alaire Austin came to feel that this man loved her she never knew. Certainly he gave no voice to his feeling, save, perhaps, by some unconscious tone or trick of speech; rather, the knowledge came to her intuitively as the result of some subconscious interchange of thought, some responsive vibration, which only a psychologist could analyze. However it was, Alaire knew to-night that she was dear to her companion, and, strange to say, this certainty did not disturb her. Inasmuch as the thing existed, why deny its right to exist? she asked herself. Since it was in no wise dishonorable, how could it be wrong, provided it went no further? Alaire had been repelled by Luis Longorio's evident love for her, but a similar emotion in this man's breast had quite the opposite effect. She was eager for friendship, hungry for affection, starved for that worship which every woman lives upon. Having a wholesome confidence in her own strength of character, and complete faith in Law's sense of honor, she was neither alarmed nor offended.

For the first time in years she allowed her intimate thoughts free expression, and spoke of her hopes, her interests, and her efforts; under the spell of the moonlight she even confided something about those dreams that kept her company and robbed her world of its sordidness. Dave Law discovered that she lived in a fanciful land of unrealities, and the glimpse he gained of it was delightful.

Supper was waiting when they arrived at Las Palmas, and Dolores announced that "Young Ed" had telephoned from the Lewis ranch that he would not be home. Yielding to a sudden impulse, Alaire said to her companion:

"You must dine with me. Dolores will show you to a room. I will be ready in half an hour."

Dave hesitated, but it was not in human nature to refuse. Later, as he washed himself and combed his hair, he had a moment of misgivings; but the next instant he asked himself wherein he was doing wrong. Surely there was no law which denied him the right to love, provided he kept that love a secret. The inner voice did not argue with him; yet he was disquieted and restless as he paced the big living-room, waiting for his hostess.

The Austin ranch-house offered a contrast to the majority of Texas country homes. "Young Ed" had built almost a mansion for his bride, and in the latter years Alaire had remodeled and changed it to suit her own ideas. The verandas were wide, the rooms large and cool and open; polished floors, brilliant grass mats, and easy wicker furniture gave it a further airiness. The place was comfortable, luxurious; yet it was a home and it had an atmosphere.

Not for many years had Dave Law been a guest amid such surroundings, and as the moments dragged on he began to feel more and more out of place. With growing discomfort he realized that the mistress of this residence was the richest woman in all this part of Texas, and that he was little better than a tramp. His free life, his lack of care and responsibility, had bred in him a certain contempt for money; nevertheless, when through the door to the dining-room he saw Alaire pause to give a final touch to the table, he was tempted to beat an ignominious retreat, for she was a radiant vision in evening dress. She was stately, beautiful; her hair was worn high, her arms were bare underneath a shimmer of lace, her gown exposed a throat round and smooth and adorable. In reality, she was simply clad; but to the Ranger's untrained eye she seemed regal, and his own rough clothes became painfully conspicuous by contrast.

Alaire knew how to be a gracious and winning hostess; of course she did not appear to notice her guest's embarrassment. She had rather welcomed the thought that this man cared for her, and yet, had she deliberately planned to dampen his feeling, she could hardly have succeeded better than by showing him the wide disparity in their lives and situations. Dave was dismayed; he felt very poor and ridiculous. Alaire was no longer the woman he had ridden with through the solitudes; her very friendliness seemed to be a condescension.

He did not linger long after they had dined, for he wished to be alone, where he could reach an understanding with himself. On the steps he waited just a moment for Alaire to mention, if she chose, that subject which they had still left open on the night before. Reading his thought, she said:

"You are expecting me to say something about Panfilo Sanchez."

"Yes."

"I have thought it over; in fact, I have been thinking about it all day; but even yet I don't know what to tell you. One moment I think the truth would merely provoke another act of violence; the next I feel that it must be made public regardless of consequences. As for its effect upon myself—you know I care very little what people say or think."

"I'm sorry I killed the fellow—I shouldn't have done it, but—one sees things differently out in the rough and here in the settled country. Laws don't work alike in all places; they depend a good deal upon—geography. There are times when the theft of a crust of bread would warrant the punishment I gave Panfilo. I can't help but feel that his conduct, under the circumstances, called for—what he got. He wasn't a good man, in spite of what José says; Anto confessed to me that they were planning all sorts of deviltry together."

"That is hardly an excuse." Alaire smiled faintly.

"Oh, I know!" Dave agreed. "But, you see, I don't feel the need of one. The sentimental side of the affair, which bothers you, doesn't affect me in the least."

Alaire nodded. "You have made me understand how you look at things, and I must confess that I tolerate actions that would have shocked me before I came to know this country. Panfilo is dead and gone—rightly or wrongly, I don't know. What I dread now is further consequences."

"Don't weaken on my account."

"No! I'm not thinking of the consequences to you or to me. You are the kind of man who can protect himself, I'm sure; your very ability in that direction frightens me a little on José's account. But"—she sighed and lifted her round shoulders in a shrug—"perhaps time will decide this question for us."

Dave laughed with some relief. "I think you've worried yourself enough over it, ma'am," he said; "splitting hairs as to what's right and what's wrong, when it doesn't matter much, in either case. Suppose you continue to think it over at your leisure."

"Perhaps I'd better. And now"—Alaire extended her hand—"won't you and Montrosa come to see me once in a while? I'm very lonesome."

"We'd love to," Dave declared. He had it on his lips to say more, but at that moment an eager whinny and an impatient rattle of a bridle-bit came from the driveway, and he smiled. "There's her acceptance now."

"Oh no! She merely heard your voice, the fickle creature."

Alaire watched her guest until he had disappeared into the shadows, then she heard him talking to the mare. Benito's words at the *rodeo* recurred to her, and she wondered if this Ranger might not also have a way with women.

The house was very still and empty when she reentered it.

XVII

THE GUZMAN INCIDENT

RICARDO GUZMAN did not return from Romero. When two days had passed with no word from him, his sons became alarmed and started an investigation, but without the slightest result. Even Colonel Blanco himself could not hazard a guess as to Guzman's fate; the man had disappeared, it seemed, completely and mysteriously. Meanwhile, from other quarters of the Mexican town came rumors that set the border afire.

Readers of this story may remember the famous "Guzman incident," so called, and the complications that resulted from it, fcr at the time it raised a storm of indignation as the crowning atrocity of the Mexican revolution, serving further to disturb the troubled waters of diplomacy and threatening for a moment to upset the precariously balanced relations of the two countries.

At first the facts appeared plain: a citizen of the United States had been lured across the border and done to death by Mexican soldiers—for it soon became evident that Ricardo was dead. The outrage was a *casus belli* such as no self-respecting people could ignore; so ran the popular verdict. Then when that ominous mailed serpent which lay coiled along the Rio Grande stirred itself, warlike Americans prepared themselves to hear of big events.

A motive for Ricardo Guzman's murder was not lacking, for it was generally known that President Potosi had long resented Yankee enmity, particularly as that enmity was directed at him personally. A succession of irritating diplomatic skirmishes, an unsatisfactory series of verbal sparring matches, had roused the old Indian's anger, and it was considered likely that he had adopted this means of permanently severing his relations with Washington.

Of course, the people of Texas were delighted that the long-delayed hour had struck; accordingly, when the State Department seemed strangely loath to investigate the matter, when, in fact, it manifested a willingness to allow Don Ricardo ample time in which to come to life in preference to putting a further strain upon international relations, they were both surprised and enraged. Telegraph wires began to buzz; the governor of the state sent a crisply sarcastic message to the national capital, offering to despatch a company of Rangers after Guzman's body just to prove that he was indeed dead and that the Mexican authorities were lying when they professed ignorance of the fact.

This offer not only caught the popular fancy north of the Rio Grande, but it likewise had an effect on the other side of the river, for on the very next day General Luis Longorio set out for Romero to investigate personally the rancher's disappearance.

Now, throughout all this public clamor, truth, as usual, lay hidden at the bottom of its well, and few even of Ricardo's closest friends suspected the real reason for his murder.

Jonesville, of course, could think or talk of little else than this outrage, and Blaze Jones, as befitted its leading citizen, was loudest in his criticism of the government's weak-kneed policy.

"It makes me right sore to think I'm an American," he confided to Dave. "Why, if Ricardo had been an Englishman the British consul at Mexico City would have called on Potosi the minute the news came. He'd have stuck a six-shooter under the President's nose and made him locate Don Ricardo, or pay an indemnity and kiss the Union Jack." Blaze's conception of diplomacy was peculiar. "If Potosi didn't talk straight that British consul would have bent a gun-bar'l over the old ruffian's bean and telephoned for a couple hundred battle-ships. England protects her sons. But we Americans are cussed with notions of brotherly love and universal peace. Bah! We're bound to have war, Dave, some day or other. Why not start it now?"

Dave nodded his agreement. "Yes. We'll have to step in and take the country over, sooner or later. But—everybody has the wrong idea of this Guzman killing. The Federal officers in Romero didn't frame it up."

"No? Who did?"

"Tad Lewis."

Jones started. "What makes you think that?"

"Listen! Tad was afraid to let Urbina come to trial—you remember one of his men boasted that the case would never be heard? Well, it won't. Ricardo's dead and the other witness is gone. Now draw your own conclusions."

"Gone? You mean the fellow who saw Urbina and Garza together?"

"Yes. He has disappeared, too—evidently frightened away."

Jones was amazed. "Say, Dave," he cried, "that means your case has blown up, eh?"

"Absolutely. Lewis has been selling 'wet' stock to the Federals, and he probably arranged with some of them to murder Ricardo. At any rate, that's my theory."

Blaze cursed eloquently. "I'd like to hang it on to Tad; I'd sure clean house down his way if I was positive."

"I sent a man over to Romero," Dave explained further. "He tells me Ricardo is dead, all right; but nobody knows how he died, or why. There's a new grave in the little cemetery above the town, but nobody knows who's buried in it. There hasn't been a death in Romero lately." The speaker watched his friend closely. "Ricardo's family would like to have his body, and I'd like to see it myself. Wouldn't you? We could tell just what happened to him. If he really faced a firing-squad, for instance—I reckon Washington would have something to say, eh?"

"What are you aimin' at?" Blaze inquired.

"If we had Ricardo's body on this side it would put an end to all the lies, and perhaps force Colonel Blanco to make known the real facts. It might even mean a case against Tad Lewis. What do you think of my reasoning?"

"It's eighteen karat. What d'you say we go over there and get Ricardo?"

Dave smiled. "That's what I've been leading up to. Will you take a chance?"

"Hell, yes!"

"I knew you would. All we need is a pair of Mexicans to—do the work. I liked Ricardo; I owe him something."

"Suppose we're caught?"

"In that case we'll have to run for it, and—I presume I'll be discharged from the Ranger service."

"I ain't very good at runnin'—not from Mexicans." Blaze's eyes were bright and hard at the thought. "It's more'n possible that, if they discover us, we can start a nice little war of our own."

That evening Dave managed to get his Ranger captain by long-distance telephone, and for some time the two talked guardedly. When Dave rang off they had come to a thorough understanding.

It had been an easy matter for José Sanchez to secure a leave of absence from Las Palmas, especially since Benito was not a little interested in the unexplained disappearance of Panfilo and work was light at this time. Benito did not think it necessary to mention the horse-breaker's journey to his employer; so that Alaire knew nothing whatever about the matter until José himself asked permission to see her on a matter of importance.

The man had ridden hard most of the previous night, and his excitement was patent. Even before he spoke Alaire realized that Panfilo's fate was known to him, and she decided swiftly that there must be no further concealment.

"*Señora!* A terrible thing!" José burst forth. "God knows, I am nearly mad with grief. It is about my sainted cousin. It is strange, unbelievable! My head whirls—"

Alaire quieted him, saying in Spanish, "Calm yourself, José, and tell me everything from the beginning."

"But how can I be calm? Oh, what a crime! What a misfortune! Well, then, Panfilo is completely dead. I rode to that *tanque* where you saw him last, and what do you think? But—you know?"

Alaire nodded. "I—suspected."

José's dark face blazed; he bent forward eagerly. "What did you suspect, and why? Tell me all. There is something black and hellish here, and I must know about it quickly."

"Suppose you tell me your story first," Alaire answered, "and remember that you are excited."

The Mexican lowered his voice. "*Bueno!* Forgive me if I seem half crazed. Well, I rode to that water-hole and found—nothing. It is a lonely place; only the brush cattle use it; but I said to myself, 'Panfilo drank here. He was alive. Beyond there is nothing. So I will begin.' God was my helper, *señora*. I found him—his bones as naked and clean as pebbles. *Caramba!* You should have heard me then! I was like a demon! I couldn't think, I couldn't reason. I rode from that accursed spot as if Panfilo's ghost pursued me and—I am here. I shall rouse the country; the people shall demand the blood of my cousin's assassin. It is the crime of a century."

"Wait! When you spoke to me last I didn't dream that Panfilo was dead, but since then I have learned the truth, and why he was killed. You must let me tell you everything, José, just as it happened; then—you may do whatever you think best. And you shall have the whole truth."

It was a trying situation; in spite of her brave beginning, Alaire was tempted to send the Mexican on to Jonesville, there to receive an explanation directly from David Law himself; but such a course she dared not risk. José was indeed half crazed, and at this moment quite irresponsible; if he met Dave, terrible consequences would surely follow. Accordingly, it was with a peculiar, apprehensive flutter in her breast that Alaire realized the crisis had come. Heretofore she had blamed Law, but now, oddly enough, she found herself interested in defending him. As calmly as she could she related all that had led up to the tragedy, while José listened with eyes wide and mouth open.

"You see, I had no suspicion of the truth," she concluded. "It was a terrible thing, and Mr. Law regrets it deeply. He would have made a report to the authorities, only—he feared it might embarrass me. He will repeat to you all that I have said, and he is ready to meet the consequences."

José was torn with rage, yet plainly a prey to indecision; he rolled his eyes and cursed under his breath. "These Rangers!" he muttered. "That is the kind of men they are. They murder honest people."

"This was not murder," Alaire cried, sharply. "Panfilo was aiding a felon to escape. The courts will not punish Mr. Law."

"Bah! Who cares for the courts? This man is a

Gringo, and these are *Gringo* laws. But I am Mexican, and Panfilo was my cousin. We shall see."

Alaire's eyes darkened. "Don't be rash, José," she exclaimed, warningly. "Mr. Law bears you no ill-will, but—he is a dangerous man. You would do well to make some inquiries about him. You are a good man; you have a long life before you." Reading the fellow's black look, she argued: "You think I am taking his part because he is my countryman, but he needs no one to defend him. He will make this whole story public and face the consequences. I like you, and I don't wish to see you come to a worse end than your cousin Panfilo."

José continued to glower. Then, turning away, he said, without meeting his employer's eyes, "I would like to draw my money."

"Very well. I am sorry to have you leave Las Palmas, for I have regarded you as one of my *gente*." José's face remained stony. "What do you intend to do? Where are you going?"

The fellow shrugged. "*Quien sabe!* Perhaps I shall go to my General Longorio. He is in Romero, just across the river; he knows a brave man when he sees one, and he needs fellows like me to kill rebels. Well, you shall hear of me. People will tell you about that demon of a José whose cousin was murdered by the Rangers. Yes, I have the heart of a bandit."

Alaire smiled faintly. "You will be shot," she told him. "Those soldiers have little to eat and no money at all."

But José's bright eyes remained hostile and his expression baffling. It was plain to Alaire that her explanation of his cousin's death had carried not the slightest conviction, and she even began to fear that her part in the affair had caused him to look upon her as an accessory. Nevertheless, when she paid him his wages she gave him a good horse, which José accepted with thanks but without gratitude. As Alaire watched him ride away with never a backward glance she decided that she must lose no time in apprising the Ranger of this new condition of affairs.

She drove her automobile to Jonesville that afternoon, more worried than she cared to admit. It was a moral certainty, she knew, that José Sanchez would, sooner or later, attempt to take vengeance upon his cousin's slayer, and there was no telling when he might become sufficiently inflamed with poisonous Mexican liquor to be in the mood for killing. Then, too, there were friends of Panfilo always ready to lend bad counsel.

Law was nowhere in town, and so, in spite of her reluctance, Alaire was forced to look for him at the Joneses' home. As she had never called upon Paloma, and had made it almost impossible for the girl to visit Las Palmas, the meeting of the two women was somewhat formal. But no one could long remain stiff or constrained with Paloma Jones; the girl had a directness of manner and an honest, friendly smile that simply would not be denied. Her delight that Alaire had come to see her pleased and shamed the elder woman, who hesitatingly confessed the object of her visit.

"Oh, I thought you were calling on me." Paloma pouted her pretty lips. "Dave isn't here. He and father—have gone away." A little pucker of apprehension appeared upon her brow.

"I must get word to him at once."

Miss Jones shook her head. "Is it very important?"

It needed no close observation to discover the concern in Paloma's eyes; Alaire told her story quickly. "Mr. Law must be warned right away," she added, "for the man is capable of anything."

Paloma nodded. "Dave told us how he had killed Panfilo—" She hesitated, and then cried, impulsively: "Mrs. Austin, I'm going to confess something—I've got to tell somebody or I'll burst. I was walking the floor when you came. Well, Dad and Dave have completely lost their wits. They have gone across the river—to get Ricardo Guzman's body."

"What?" Alaire stared at the girl uncomprehendingly.

"They are going to dig him up and bring him back to prove that he was killed. Dave knows where he's buried, and he's doing this for Ricardo's family—some foolish sentiment about a bridle — but Dad, I think, merely wants to start a war between the United States and Mexico."

"My dear girl, aren't you dreaming?"

"I thought I must be when I heard about it. Dad wouldn't have told me at all, only he thought I ought to know in case anything happens to him." Paloma's breath failed her momentarily. "They'll be killed. I told them so, but Dave seems to enjoy the risk. He said Ricardo had a sentimental nature—and, of course, the possibility of danger delighted both him and Dad. They're perfect fools."

"When did they go? Tell me everything."

"They left an hour ago in my machine, with two Mexicans to help them. They intend to cross at your pumping-plant as soon as it gets dark, and be back by midnight—that is, if they ever get back."

"Why, it's—unbelievable."

"It's too much for me. Longorio himself is in Romero, and he'd have them shot if he caught them. We'd never even hear of it." Paloma's face was pale, her eyes were strained and tragic. "Father always has been a trial to me, but I thought I could do something with Dave." She made a hopeless gesture, and Alaire wondered momentarily whether the girl's anxiety was keenest for the safety of her father or—the other?

"Can't we prevent them from going?" she inquired. "Why, they are breaking the law, aren't they?"

"Something like that. But what can we do? It's nearly dark, and they'll go, anyhow, regardless of what we say."

"Mr. Law is a Ranger, too!"

The girl nodded. "Oh, if it's ever discovered he'll be ruined. And think of Dad—a man of property! Dave declares Tad Lewis is at the bottom of it all and put the Federals up to murder Ricardo; he thinks in this way he can force them into telling the truth. But Dad is just looking for a fight and wants to be a hero!"

There was a moment of silence. Then Alaire reasoned aloud: "I presume they chose our pumping-plant because it is directly opposite the Romero cemetery. I could have Benito and some trusty men waiting on this side. Or I could even send them over—"

"No, no! Don't you understand? The whole thing is illegal."

"Well, we could be there—you and I."

Paloma agreed eagerly. "Yes! Maybe we could even help them if they got into trouble."

"Come, then! We'll have supper at Las Palmas and slip down to the river and wait."

Paloma was gone with a rush. In a moment she returned, ready for the trip, and with her she carried a Winchester rifle nearly as long as herself.

"I hope you aren't afraid of firearms," she panted. "I've owned this gun for years."

"I am rather a good shot," Alaire told her.

Paloma closed her lips firmly. "Good! Maybe we'll come in handy, after all. Anyhow, I'll bet those Mexicans won't chase Dad and Dave very far."

José Sanchez was true to his declared purpose. With a horse of his own between his knees, with money in his pocket and hate in his heart, he left Las Palmas, and, riding to the Lewis crossing, forded the Rio Grande. By early afternoon he was in Romero, and there, after some effort, he succeeded in finding General Longorio.

Romero, at this time the southern outpost of Federal territory, standing guard against the Rebel forces in Tamaulipas, is a sun-baked little town sprawling about a naked plaza, and, except for the presence of Colonel Blanco's detachment of troops, it would have presented much the same appearance as any one of the lazy border villages. A scow ferry had at one time linked it on the American side with a group of 'dobe houses which were sanctified by the pious name of Sangre de Cristo, but of late years more advantageous crossings above and below had come into some use and Romero's ferry had been abandoned. Perhaps a mile above Sangre de Cristo, and directly opposite Romero's weed-grown cemetery, stood the pumping-plant of Las Palmas, its corrugated iron roof and high-flung chimney forming a conspicuous landmark.

Luis Longorio had just awakened from his *siesta* when José gained admittance to his presence. The general lay at ease in the best bed of the best house in the village; he greeted the new-comer with a smile.

"So, my brave José, you wish to become a soldier and fight for your country, eh?"

"Yes, my general."

Longorio yawned and stretched lazily. "Body of Christ! This is a hard life. Here am I in this goatherd's hovel, hot, dirty, and half starved, and all because of a fellow I never saw who got himself killed. You would think this Ricardo was an Englishman instead of a *Gringo*, for the fuss that is made. Who was he? Some great *jefe?*"

"A miserable fellow. I knew him well. Then he is indeed dead?"

"Quite dead, I believe," Longorio said, carelessly; then turning his large, bright eyes upon the visitor, he continued, with more interest, "Now tell me about the beautiful *señora*, your mistress."

José scowled. "She's not my mistress. I am no longer of her *gente*. I have a debt of blood to wipe out."

Longorio sat up in his bed; the smile left his face. "My José," he said, quietly, "if you harm her in the least I shall bury you to the neck in an ant's nest and fill your mouth with honey. Now, what is this you are telling me?"

José, uncomfortably startled by this barbarous threat, told as connectedly as he knew how all about his cousin's death and his reasons for leaving Las Palmas.

"Ah-h!" Longorio relaxed. "You gave me a start. At first I thought you came with a message from her—but that was too much to expect; then I feared you meant the lady some evil. Now I shall tell you a little secret: I love your *señora!* Yes, I love her madly, furiously; I can think of nothing but her. I came to this abominable village more to see her than to annoy myself over the death of Ricardo Guzman. I must see my divinity; I must hear her blessed voice, or I shall go mad. Why do I tell you this? Because I have decided that you shall lead me to her to-night." The general fell silent for a moment, then, "I intend to have her some day, José, and —perhaps you will be my right hand. See, I make you my confidant because you will not dare to anger me or— Well, my little friend, you must understand what fate would befall you in that case. I can reach across the Rio Grande."

Amazement and then fear were depicted in José's face as he listened; he asserted his loyalty vehemently.

"Yes, yes, I know you love me," the general agreed, carelessly. "But what is far more to the point, I intend to pay well for your services. Perhaps I shall also arrange so that you may have a reckoning with the murderer of your cousin. What is his name?"

It was José's opportunity to make an impression, and he used it to the full, telling all that he knew of the killing of Panfilo, and describing Law with the eloquence of hatred.

Longorio listened for a time, and then held up his hand. "Enough. For my sake, too, you shall kill him, for you have made me jealous."

"Impossible!" José raised protesting palms. He was sure the general was wrong. *Señora* Austin was above suspicion of any kind.

"And yet this man met her in Pueblo and rode with her to Las Palmas? He comes to see her frequently, you say?" The general bent his bright, keen eyes upon the visitor.

"Yes. She gave him the finest horse at Las Palmas, too, and—" A new thought presented itself to José. "Ho! By the way, they were alone at the water-hole when my cousin Panfilo was shot. Now that I think of it, they were alone together for a day and a night. I begin to wonder—"

Longorio breathed an oath and swung his long legs over the edge of the bed. "You have poisoned my mind. A whole day and night, eh? That is bad. What happened? What kind of a fool is her husband? I cannot bear to think of this! See, I am beside myself. *Caramba!* I live in paradise; I come flying on the wings of the wind, only to learn that my blessed divinity has a lover. If only my excellent Blanco had shot this fellow Law instead of that Guzman! If only I could lay hands upon him here in Mexico! Ha! There would be something to print in the American papers." He began to dress himself feverishly, muttering, as he did so: "I will permit no one to come between us. . . . The thought kills me. . . . You bring me bad news, José, and yet I am glad you came. I accept your offer, and you shall be my man henceforth; . . . but you shall not go out to be shot by those rebels. No, you shall return to Las Palmas to be my eyes and my ears, and, when the time comes, you shall be my hands, too. . . . I will avenge your cousin Panfilo for you, my word on that. Yes, and I will make you a rich man."

José listened hungrily to these promises. He was relieved at the change in his plans, for, after all, a soldier's life offered few attractions, and—the food at Las Palmas was good. The general promised him fine wages, too. Truly, it was fortunate that he had come to Romero.

"Now we have settled this," José's new employer declared, "run away and amuse yourself until dark. Then we will take a little journey by way of the old ferry."

"It is not altogether safe," ventured José. "That country over there is alive with refugees."

"I will take some men with me," said Longorio. "Now go and let me think."

XVIII

ED AUSTIN TURNS AT BAY

HAD it not been for her fears, Paloma Jones would have taken her visit to the Austin ranch as an unmixed enjoyment. To her Alaire had always been an ideally romantic figure. More than once, in her moments of melancholy, Paloma had envied Mrs. Austin's unhappiness and yearned to bear a similar sorrow—to be crossed in love and to become known as a woman of tragedy. To have one's life blasted, one's happiness slain by some faithless lover, impressed the girl as interesting, thrilling. Moreover, it was a misfortune calculated to develop one's highest spiritual nature. Surely nothing could be more sadly satisfying than to live alone with regretful memories and to have the privilege of regarding the world as a vain show. Unfortunately, however, Paloma was too healthy and too practical to remain long occupied with such thoughts. She was disgustingly optimistic and merry; misanthropy was entirely lacking in her make-up; and none of her admirers seemed the least bit inclined to faithlessness. On the contrary, the men she knew were perfect nuisances in their earnestness of purpose, and she could not manage to fall in love with any one sufficiently depraved to promise her the slightest misery. Paloma felt that she was hopelessly commonplace.

Now that she had an opportunity of becoming better acquainted with the object of her envy, she made the most of it. She soon found, however, that Alaire possessed anything but an unhappy disposition, and that to pity her was quite impossible. Mrs. Austin was shy and retiring, certainly, at first, but, once the ice was broken, she was delightfully frank, friendly, and spirited.

Paloma's curiosity was all-consuming, and she explored every phase of her new friend's life with interest and delight. She even discovered that imaginary world of Alaire's, and learned something about those visionary people who bore her company.

"It must be lots of fun," said Paloma.

"Yes. Sometimes my dream-people are very real. Why—I can actually see them. Then I realize I have been too much alone."

"You ought to have children," the girl declared, calmly.

"I have. Yes! Imaginary kiddies—and they are perfect dears, too."

"Are they ever naughty?"

"Oh, indeed they are! And I have to punish them. Then I feel terribly. But they're much nicer than flesh-and-blood children, for they have no bad traits whatever, and they're so amazingly intelligent."

Such exchanges of confidence drew the women into fairly close relations by the time they had arrived at Las Palmas, but the thought of what had brought them together had a sobering effect, and during their hasty supper they discussed the situation in all its serious phases.

In offering to lend a hand in this difficulty, Alaire had acted largely upon impulse, and, now that she took time to think over the affair more coolly, she asked herself what possible business of hers it could be. How did this effort to secure Don Ricardo's body concern her? And how could she hope or expect to be of help to the men engaged in the hazardous attempt? With Paloma, of course, it was different: the girl was anxious on her father's account, and probably concerned more deeply than was Alaire for the safety of Dave Law. Probably she and Dave had an understanding—it would be natural. Well, Paloma was a nice girl and she would make a splendid wife for any man.

For her part, Paloma was troubled by no uncertainty of purpose; it did not seem to her at all absurd to go to her father's assistance, and she was so eager to be up and away that the prospect of a long evening's wait made her restless.

As usual, Ed Austin had not taken the trouble to inform his wife of his whereabouts; Alaire was relieved to find that he was out, and she decided that he had probably stayed at Tad Lewis's for supper.

The women were seated on the porch after their meal, when up the driveway rode two horsemen. A moment later a tall figure mounted the steps and came forward with outstretched hand, crying, in Spanish:

"*Señora!* I surprise you. Well, I told you some day I should give myself this great pleasure. I am here!"

"General Longorio! But—what a surprise!" Alaire's amazement was naïve; her face was that of a startled school-girl. The Mexican warmly kissed her fingers, then turned to meet Paloma Jones. As he bowed the women exchanged glances over his head. Miss Jones looked frankly frightened, and her expression plainly asked the meaning of Longorio's presence. To herself, she was wondering if it could have anything to do with that expedition to the Romero cemetery. She tried to compose herself, but apprehension flooded her.

Alaire, meanwhile, her composure recovered, was standing slim and motionless beside her chair, inquiring smoothly: "What brings you into Texas at such a time, my dear general? This is quite extraordinary."

"Need you ask me?" cried the man. "I would ride through a thousand perils, *señora*. God in his gracious-ness placed that miserable village Romero close to the gates of Heaven. Why should I not presume to look through them briefly? I came two days ago, and every hour since then I have turned my eyes in the direction of Las Palmas. At last I could wait no longer." A courtly bow at the conclusion of these words robbed the speech of its audacity and tinged it with the licensed extravagance of Latin flattery. Nevertheless, Paloma gasped and Alaire stirred uncomfortably. The semi-darkness of the veranda was an invitation to even more daring compliments, and, therefore, as she murmured a polite word of welcome, Alaire stepped through the French window at her back and into the brightly lighted living-room. Paloma Jones followed as if in a trance.

Longorio's bright eyes took a swift inventory of his surroundings; then he sighed luxuriously.

"How fine!" said he. "How beautiful! A nest for a bird of paradise!"

"Don't you consider this rather a mad adventure?" Alaire insisted. "Suppose it should become known that you crossed the river?"

Longorio snapped his fingers. "I answer to no one; I am supreme. But your interest warms my heart; it thrills me to think you care for my safety. Thus am I repaid for my days of misery."

"You surely did not"—Paloma swallowed hard—"come alone?"

"No. I have a duty to my country. I said, 'Luis, you are a brave man, and fear is a stranger to you, but, nevertheless, you must have regard for the Fatherland'; so I took measures to protect myself in case of eventualities."

"How?"

"By bringing with me some of my troopers. Oh, they are peaceable fellows!" he declared, quickly; "and they are doubtless enjoying themselves with our friend and sympathizer, Morales."

"Where?" asked Alaire.

"I left them at your pumping-plant, *señora.*" Paloma Jones sat down heavily in the nearest chair. "But you need have no uneasiness. They are quiet and orderly; they will molest nothing; no one would believe them to be soldiers. I take liberties with the laws and the customs of your country, dear lady, but—you would not care for a man who allowed such considerations to stand in his way, eh?"

Alaire answered, sharply: "It was a very reckless thing to do, and—you must not remain here."

"Yes, yes!" Paloma eagerly agreed. "You must go back at once."

But Longorio heard no voice except Alaire's. In fact, since entering the living-room he had scarcely taken his eyes from her. Now he drew his evenly arched brows together in a plaintive frown, saying, "You are inhospitable!" Then his expression lightened. "Or is it," he asked—"is it that you are indeed apprehensive for me?"

Alaire tried to speak quietly. "I should never forgive myself if you came to harm here at my ranch."

Longorio sighed. "And I hoped for a warmer welcome—especially since I have done you another favor. You saw that *hombre* who came with me?"

"Yes."

"Well, you would never guess that it is your José Sanchez, whom I prevailed upon to return to your employ. But it is no other; and he comes to beg your forgiveness for leaving. He was distracted at the news of his cousin's murder, and came to me—"

"His cousin was not murdered."

"Exactly! I told him so when I had learned the facts. A poor fellow this Panfilo—evidently a very bad man, indeed—but José admired him and was harboring thoughts of revenge. I said to him: 'José, my boy, it is better to do nothing than to act wrongly. Since it was God's will that your cousin came to a bad end, why follow in his footsteps? You will not make a good soldier. Go back to your beautiful employer, be loyal to her, and think no more about this unhappy affair.' It required some argument, I assure you, but—he is here. He comes to ask your forgiveness and to resume his position of trust."

"I am glad to have him back if he feels that way. I have nothing whatever to forgive him."

"Then he will be happy, and I have served you. That is the end of the matter." With a graceful gesture Longorio dismissed the subject. "Is it to be my pleasure," he next inquired, "to meet *Señor* Austin, your husband?"

"I am afraid not."

"Too bad. I had hoped to know him and convince him that we *Federales* are not such a bad people as he seems to think. We ought to be friends, he and I. Every loyal Mexican, in these troublesome times, desires the good-will and friendship of such important personages as *Señor* Austin. This animosity is a sad thing."

Under this flow of talk Paloma stirred uneasily, and at the first opportunity burst out: "It's far from safe for you to remain here, General Longorio. This neighborhood is terribly excited over the death of Ricardo Guzman, and if any one learned—"

"So! Then this Guzman is dead?" Longorio inquired, with interest.

"Isn't he?" blurted Paloma.

"Not so far as I can learn. Only to-day I made official report that nothing whatever could be discovered about him. Certainly he is nowhere in Romero, and it is my personal belief that the poor fellow was either drowned in the river or made way with for his money. Probably the truth will never be known. It is a distressing event, but I assure you my soldiers do not kill American citizens.

It is our boast that Federal territory is safe; one can come or go at will in any part of Mexico that is under Potosista control. I sincerely hope that we have heard the last of this Guzman affair."

Longorio had come to spend the evening, and his keen pleasure in Alaire Austin's company made him so indifferent to his personal safety that nothing short of a rude dismissal would have served to terminate his visit. Neither Alaire nor her companion, however, had the least idea how keenly he resented the presence of Paloma Jones. Ed Austin's absence he had half expected, and he had wildly hoped for an evening, an hour, a few moments, alone with the object of his desires. José's disclosures, earlier in the day, had opened the general's eyes; they had likewise inflamed him with jealousy and with passion, and accordingly he had come prepared to force his attentions with irresistible fervor should the slightest opportunity offer. To find Alaire securely chaperoned, therefore, and to be compelled to press his ardent advances in the presence of a third party, was like gall to him; the fact that he made the most of his advantages, even at the cost of scandalizing Paloma, spoke volumes for his determination.

It was a remarkable wooing; on the one hand this half-savage man, gnawed by jealousy, heedless of the illicit nature of his passion, yet held within the bounds of decorum by some fag-end of respectability; and on the other hand, a woman, bored, resentful, and tortured at the moment by fear about what was happening at the river-bank.

Alaire, too, had a further cause for worry. Of late Ed Austin had grown insultingly suspicious. More than once he had spoken of Dave Law in a way to make his wife's face crimson, and he had wilfully misconstrued her recital of Longorio's attentions. Fearing, therefore, that in spite of Paloma Jones's presence Ed would resent the general's call, Alaire strained her ears for the sound of his coming.

It was late when Austin arrived. Visitors at Las Palmas were unusual at any time; hence the sound of strange voices in the brightly lighted living-room at such an hour surprised him. He came tramping in, booted and spurred, a belligerent look of inquiry upon his bloated features. But when he had met his wife's guests his surprise turned to black displeasure. His own sympathies in the Mexican struggle were so notorious that Longorio's presence seemed to him to have but one possible significance. Why Paloma Jones was here he could not imagine.

Thus far Alaire's caller had succeeded in ignoring Miss Jones, and now, with equal self-assurance, he refused to recognize Ed's hostility. He remained at ease, and appeared to welcome this chance of meeting Austin. Yet it soon became evident that his opinion of his host was far from flattering; beneath his politeness he began to show an amused contempt, which Alaire perceived, even though her husband did not. Luis Longorio was the sort of man who enjoys a strained situation, and one who shows to the best advantage under adverse conditions. Accordingly, Ed's arrival, instead of hastening his departure, merely served to prolong his stay.

It was growing very late now, and Paloma was frantic. Profiting by her first opportunity, she whispered to Alaire: "For God's sake, send him away."

Alaire's eyes were dark with excitement. "Yes," said she. "Talk to him, and give me a chance to have a word alone with Ed."

The opportunity came when Austin went into the dining-room for a drink. Alaire excused herself to follow him. When they were out of sight and hearing her husband turned upon her with an ugly frown.

"What's that Greaser doing here?" he asked, roughly.

"He called to pay his respects. You must get him away."

"*I* must?" Ed glowered at her. "Why don't you? You got him here in my absence. Now that I'm home you want me to get rid of him, eh? What's the idea?"

"Don't be silly. I didn't know he was coming and—he must be crazy to risk such a thing."

"Crazy?" Ed's lip curled. "He isn't crazy. I suppose he couldn't stay away any longer. By God, Alaire—"

Alaire checked this outburst with a sharp exclamation: "Don't make a scene! Don't you understand he holds over fifty thousand dollars' worth of La Feria cattle? Don't you understand we can't antagonize him?"

"Is that what he came to see you about?"

"Yes." She bit her lip. "I'll explain everything, but—you must help me send him back, right away." Glancing at the clock, Alaire saw that it was drawing on toward midnight; with quick decision she seized her husband by the arm, explaining feverishly: "There is something big going on to-night, Ed! Longorio brought a guard of soldiers with him and left them at our pump-house. Well, it so happens that Blaze Jones and Mr. Law have gone to the Romero cemetery to get Ricardo Guzman's body."

"*What?*" Austin's red face paled, his eyes bulged.

"Yes. That's why Paloma is here. They crossed at our pumping-station, and they'll be back at any time, now. If they encounter Longorio's men— You understand?"

"God Almighty!" Austin burst forth. "Ricardo Guzman's body!" He wet his lips and swallowed with difficulty. "Why—do they want the body?"

"To prove that he is really dead and—to prove who killed him." Noting the effect of these words, Alaire cried, sharply, "What's the matter, Ed?"

But Austin momentarily was beyond speech. The decanter from which he was trying to pour himself a drink played a musical tattoo upon his glass; his face had become ashen and pasty.

"Have they got the body? Do they know who shot him?" he asked, dully.

"No, no!" Alaire was trembling with impatience. "Don't you understand? They are over there now, and they'll be back about midnight. If Longorio had come alone, or if he had left his men at Sangre de Cristo, everything would be all right. But those soldiers at Morales's house will be up and awake. Why, it couldn't have happened worse!"

"How many men has he got?" Austin nodded in the direction of the front room.

"I don't know. Probably four or five. What ails you?"

"That—won't do. They won't—fight on this side of the river. They—they'd hold them off."

"Who? What are you talking about?"

Something in her husband's inexplicable agitation, something in the hunted, desperate way in which his eyes were running over the room, alarmed Alaire.

Ed utterly disregarded her question. Catching sight of the telephone, which stood upon a stand in the far corner of the room, he ran to it and, snatching the receiver, violently oscillated the hook.

"Don't do that!" Alaire cried, following him. "Wait! It mustn't get out."

"Hello! Give me the Lewis ranch—quick—I've forgotten the number." With his free hand Ed held his wife at a distance, muttering harshly: "Get away now! I know what I'm doing. Get away—damn you!" He flung Alaire from him as she tried to snatch the instrument out of his hands.

"What do you want of Lewis?" she panted.

"None of your business. You keep away or I'll hurt you."

"Ed!" she cried "Are you out of your mind? You mustn't—"

Their voices were raised now, heedless of the two people in the adjoining room.

"Keep your hands off, I tell you. Hello! Is that you, Tad?" Again Austin thrust his wife violently aside. "Listen! I've just learned that Dave Law and old man Jones have crossed over to dig up Ricardo's body. Yes, to-night! They're over there now—be back inside of an hour."

Alaire leaned weakly against the table, her frightened eyes fixed upon the speaker. Even yet she could not fully grasp the meaning of her husband's behavior and tried to put aside those fears that were distracting her. Perhaps, after all, she told herself, Ed was taking his own way to—

"Yes! They aim to discover how he was killed and all about it. Sure! I suppose they found out where he was buried. They crossed at my pumping-plant, and they'll be back with the body to-night, if they haven't already—" The speaker's voice broke, his hand was shaking so that he could scarcely retain his hold upon the telephone. "How the hell do I know?" he chattered. "It's up to you. You've got a machine—"

"*Ed!*" cried the wife. She went toward him on weak, unsteady feet, but she halted as the voice of Longorio cut in sharply:

"What's this I hear? Ricardo Guzman's body?" Husband and wife turned. The open double-door to the living-room framed the tall figure of the Mexican general.

XIX

RANGERS

LONGORIO stared first at the huddled, perspiring man beside the telephone and then at the frightened woman. "Is that the truth?" he demanded, harshly.

"Yes," Austin answered. "They are bringing the body to this side. You know what that means."

"Did you know this?" The general turned upon Alaire. Of the four he was the least excited.

From the background Paloma quavered: "You told us Ricardo was not dead, so—it is all right. There is no—harm done."

A brief silence ensued, then Longorio shrugged. "Who knows? Let us hope that he suffered no harm on Mexican soil. That would be serious, indeed; yes, very serious, for I have given my word to your government. This—David Law—he pronounced the name carefully, but with a strange, foreign accent—"he is a reckless person to defy the border regulations. It is a grave matter to invade foreign territory on such a mission." Longorio again bent his brilliant eyes upon Alaire. "I see that you are concerned for his safety. You would not desire him to come to trouble, eh? He has done you favors; he is your friend, as I am. Well"—a mirthless smile exposed his splendid white teeth—"we must think of that. Now I will bid you good night."

"Where are you going?" demanded Miss Jones.

"To the river, and then to Romero. I may be needed, for those men of mine are stupid fellows and there is danger of a misunderstanding. In the dark anything may happen. I should like to meet this David Law; he is a man of my own kind." Turning to "Young Ed," he said: "There is reason for haste, and a horse moves slowly. Would you do me the favor, if you have an automobile—"

"No! I won't!" Ed declared. "I don't want to see the Rio Grande to-night. I won't be involved—"

"But you are already involved. Come! There is no time to waste, and I have something to say to you. You will drive me to the river, and my horse will remain here until I return for him."

There was no mistaking the command in Longorio's tone; the master of Las Palmas rose as if under compulsion. He took his hat, and the two men left the room.

"Oh, my God!" Paloma gasped. "They'll be in time, and so will the Lewis gang."

"Quick! Ed will take his runabout—we'll follow in my car." Alaire fled to make herself ready. A few moments later she looked out from her window and saw the headlights of Ed's runabout flash down the driveway to the road; then she and Paloma rushed to the garage where the touring-car stood.

"They'll never expect us to follow them"—Alaire tried to speak hopefully—"and we'll drive without lights. Maybe we'll get there in time, after all." As the machine rolled out through the gate she elaborated the half-formed plan that had come to her: "The brush is thick along the river; we can leave the car hidden and steal up to the pump-house. When we hear the boat coming maybe we can call out in time to warn your father."

"The moon is rising," Paloma half sobbed. "They'll be sure to see us. Do you think we're ahead of Tad Lewis?"

"Oh yes. He hasn't had time to get here yet, but—

he'll come fast when he starts. This is the only plan I can think of."

Alaire drove as swiftly as she dared, following the blurred streak of gray that was the road, and taking the bumps with utter recklessness. Already the yellow rim of the moon was peering over the horizon to her right, and by its light she found the road that turned abruptly toward the Rio Grande, a mile or more distant. The black mud from the last heavy rain had hardened; the ruts in this side road were deep, and the car leaped and plunged, flinging its occupants from side to side. Ahead loomed the dark ridge of the river thickets, a dense rampart of mesquite, ebony, and coma, with here and there a taller alamo or hackberry thrusting itself skyward. But even before they were sheltered from the moonlight Paloma saw the lights of another automobile approaching along the main-traveled highway behind them—the lights, evidently, of Tad Lewis's machine. A moment later Alaire's car drove into the black shadows, but, fearing to switch on her headlights, she felt her way cautiously between the walls of foliage until at her right another opening showed, like a narrow arroyo, diverging from the one they followed. Into this she swerved, regardless of the fact that it was half grown up with brush. Thorny branches swept the sides of the machine; rank, dew-soaked grass rose to the height of the tonneau. The car came to a jolting pause, then the motor ceased its purring, and the two women sat motionless, listening for the rattle of the on-coming machine. It had been a short, swift, exciting ride. "Young Ed's" runabout could not be many minutes ahead of them.

Alaire knew the Tad Lewis car, an old-style, cheap affair, which advertised its mechanical imperfections by a loud clashing of gears and a noisy complaint of loose parts; therefore, when the leafy cañon walls behind her hiding-place were brilliantly illuminated and a car stole silently past at low speed, she seized Paloma by the arm and whispered:

"That's not Lewis."

"Who is it? It can't be Ed."

"No, he and Longorio are ahead of us. It's another motor entirely."

The women got out, then breasted the high grass and brambles between their hiding-place and the pump-house road. As soon as they were back in the trail they made all possible speed, speculating meanwhile upon the mystery of the unknown car. Emerging into the clearing which surrounded the power-plant, they discovered the machine in question standing dark and deserted in the shadows. Evidently the driver, whoever he was, well knew what he was about, and had not blundered upon this place by accident. A hundred yards away they could now see the ghostly Rio Grande, its saffron surface faintly silvered by the low moon; lights gleamed from the windows of Morales's house. In the distance the vague outlines of the Mexican shore were resolving themselves, and far beyond winked the evidence that some belated citizens of Romero were still awake.

Paloma had brought with her the long-barreled Winchester rifle, and this she clutched nervously as she and Alaire stood whispering. Conditions were favorable for an approach to the pump-house itself, for two ridges of earth, perhaps eight feet high, thrown up like parallel furrows from a giant plow, marked the beginning of the irrigation ditch, and in the shadow of these the women worked their way forward, unobserved. They had nearly reached their goal when out into the clearing behind them, with metallic rattle and clang, burst another automobile, and Paloma whispered, excitedly:

"There's the Lewis outfit at last."

In the Lewis car were several men. They descended hurriedly, and when one of them ran around the front of the car to turn off its lights both women saw that he carried a rifle. Evidently Tad Lewis had come prepared for desperate measures.

A small door gave entrance to the boiler-room, and into the lock of this Mrs. Austin fitted a key; the next moment she and Paloma were safely inside. They found themselves in utter darkness now, with a smooth brick floor beneath their feet and a strong odor of oil and burnt fuel in their nostrils.

Alaire was agreeably surprised in Paloma Jones, for, although the girl was wrought to a pitch of hysterical excitement, she had, nevertheless, retained her wits; nor had she faltered in the slightest. It was evident that the fighting blood of her father was aroused in her, for she said, calmly:

"When it gets light enough to shoot, I'm going to get Tad Lewis."

"Don't act too quickly," cautioned Alaire. "Perhaps your father and Dave have come and gone. Anyhow, we can warn them just as well by firing into the air."

In reply to this suggestion Paloma merely muttered something under her breath.

The brief night ride had given Alaire time in which to recover from her first apprehensions, and now she was surprised at her own coolness. Ed's behavior had shocked and horrified her; she was still half paralyzed at his treachery; nevertheless, her mind was clear, and she was determined to avert a tragedy if possible. She knew only too well what would happen when Blaze Jones and Dave Law encountered the Lewis gang; the presence of Longorio's soldiers merely made more certain the outcome of that meeting. The general was furious; it was plain that he would not tolerate this expedition, the avowed purpose of which was to prove him a liar. It would make but little difference, therefore, whether the quest for Ricardo Guzman's body had been successful or not; even the fact that this was American soil would not deter Longorio from violent action, for the Rio Grande was no real boundary, and this part of Texas was as truly Mexican as that other river-bank which lay two hundred yards distant.

A confusion of such thoughts were racing through Alaire's mind as she felt her way out of the boiler-room and into that part of the building where the pumping machinery stood. Dusty, cobwebbed windows let in a faint ghost-glow of moonlight, but prevented clear observation of anything outside; Alaire's fumbling fingers found the latch of the front door and began to lift it, when some one spoke, just outside the building.

"What did you discover?" inquired a voice which neither woman recognized. Paloma clutched blindly for her companion; the two eavesdroppers stood rooted in their tracks. The pounding of their hearts sounded loudly. Since the building was little more than a wooden shell, they could plainly hear the answer:

"The house is full of Greasers. I can't tell who they are."

A third man spoke, this time in Spanish. "That was Tad Lewis who just came, *señor*."

There followed some whispered words indistinguishable to the listeners, then a rustle of bodies moving through the tall grass and weeds.

Paloma placed her lips close to Alaire's ear. "Who are those people?" she breathed.

"I don't know. They must be the ones who came in that strange automobile."

Paloma chattered viciously: "Everybody in Texas is here. I wish we'd thought to scatter tacks behind us."

Cautiously they swung the door back and looked out. The open space along the river-bank was leveled by the moonlight; from Morales's house, to their right, came the sound of voices. The women waited.

A few moments, then a number of men appeared. Paloma judged there were at least a dozen, but she was too excited to count them. As they came straggling toward the pump-house one of them called back:

"Morales! Put out your damned lights." Both women recognized Tad Lewis as the speaker.

Alaire had stubbornly refused to charge her husband with any active share in this evil business, but her faith in Ed suddenly vanished when she heard him say:

"Hush! You're making too much noise. You'd better scatter out, too, for there's no telling where they'll land." Alaire leaned weakly against the door. "I'm going to leave, and let you-all attend to the rest," he was saying. But Tad Lewis halted him as he turned from the group.

"Where are you going, Ed? You left your car back yonder by the road. I almost ran into it."

"Eh? What are you talking about? My car is over by Morales's house."

"*Señor* Austin is in a great hurry," sneered some one in Spanish. "Once more he leaves all of the fighting to his friends."

"That's Adolfo Urbina," panted Paloma. "I know him." Stung by this open charge of cowardice, Austin began a voluble defense, but in the midst of it General Longorio addressed him, sharply:

"You will stay here, *señor*. Nobody leaves this place."

"I told you I wouldn't be a party to the business," Ed declared, hotly. "You forced me to come in the first place—"

"Yes! And now I force you to stay."

Longorio's stand appeared to please Lewis, who chimed in with the words: "That's right, Ed. You've got to stick, for once in your life."

"What do you mean, you nearly ran into my car back yonder?" Austin asked, after a moment.

"Ain't that your machine yonder by the thicket?" inquired Lewis. "If it ain't, whose is it?" As no one answered, he started in the direction he had indicated; but at that moment a man came running from the river-bank, crying, softly:

"Look out! They come."

"I'm going to shoot," Paloma Jones gasped, but Alaire, who once again heard the sound of whispering in the shadows just outside their hiding-place, managed to restrain her companion. It was well that she succeeded, for even as Paloma raised her weapon a man passed swiftly by the crack of the half-open door and scarcely ten feet beyond the muzzle of the rifle. He was followed by three others.

The first of the new-comers, acting as spokesman for his party, stepped out into the moonlight and cried, loudly: "Hello, men! What's goin' on here?" It was an American voice; it had a broad, slow, Texas drawl.

The group of plotters turned, there was a startled murmur, then Tad Lewis answered:

"Hello! Who are you? What do you want?"

"I reckon we must have got off the road," announced the stranger. Then he peered out across the river: "Say! Ain't that a skiff coming yonder?" he inquired.

"Well, it don't look like a steamboat." Lewis laughed, disagreeably. "We're havin' a little party of our own. I reckon you fellows had better beat it. Understand?"

The outposts that had been sent to cover the bank in both directions were now coming in. Through the stillness of the night there sounded the thump of oar-locks. Seeing that the stranger did not seem to take his hint, Lewis raised his voice menacingly:

"That's your road back yonder. It's a right good road, and I'd advise you to travel it, fast."

But this suggestion was also ignored; in fact, it appeared to amuse the man addressed, for he, too, laughed.

He turned, and the women noticed that he carried a short saddle-gun. They saw, also, that at least one of the men at his back was similarly armed.

"Now, what's the hurry?" The stranger was chuckling. Suddenly he raised his voice and called, loudly: "Hello, Dave! Is that you-all?"

The answer floated promptly back: "Hello, Cap! Sure it's us."

"Have you got him?"

It was Blaze Jones's voice which answered this time: "You bet!"

Paloma Jones was trembling now. She clung to Alaire, crying, thankfully: "It's the Rangers! The Rangers!" Then she broke away and ran out into the moonlight, trailing her absurd firearm after her.

"Now, boys," the Ranger captain was saying, "I know 'most every one of you, and we ain't going to have the least bit of trouble over this thing, are we? I reckon you-all are friends of Ricardo Guzman, and you just couldn't wait to find out about him, eh?"

Alaire, who had followed Paloma, was close enough now to recognize the two Guzman boys as members of the Ranger party. Lewis and his men had drawn together at the first alarm; Longorio's Mexicans had gathered about their leader. The entire situation had changed in a moment, and the Ranger captain was in control of it.

Soon Dave Law and Blaze Jones came up over the river-bank; they paused, stricken with surprise at finding a score of people where they had expected no more than four.

Blaze was the first to speak. "What the hell?" he cried. He peered near-sightedly from one to the other; then his huge bulk shook with laughter: "Say, do my glasses magnify, or is this an Odd-Fellows meetin'?"

"Dad! Oh, Dad!" Paloma scurried to him and flung herself into his arms.

"Lord of mercy, kid!" the father exclaimed. "Why, you'd ought to be home and abed, long ago. You'll catch your death of cold. Is that gun loaded."

Dave Law was even more amazed than his companion. His first glimpse of the waiting figures had warned him that something had gone wrong, and, therefore, he did not stop to ask himself how Tad Lewis and Longorio could have learned of this affair, or what could have brought Alaire and Ed Austin to the scene. Recovering from his first surprise, he took a position beside his superior officer.

Captain Evans did not seem at all troubled by the disparity in numbers. One Ranger, or two at the most, had always been sufficient to quell a Texan disturbance; now that there were three of them, he felt equal to an invasion of Mexican soil, if necessary. In consequence he relaxed his watchful vigilance, and to Dave he drawled:

"We've got most of the leading citizens of the county, and I reckon somebody in the outfit will be able to identify Guzman."

"There's no trouble about that, sir. We found him. Pedro and Raoul can make sure." The sons of Ricardo Guzman stepped forward promptly, and Law waved them toward the boat landing, where the two helpers were waiting with Ricardo's remains.

Despite the Ranger captain's easy assumption of command, the strain of the situation had not subsided, and Longorio drew swift attention to himself when he said:

"It is fortunate that I chanced to learn of this matter. You have done me a great service, *Señor* Law, for I came to Romero purposely to examine into the death of this unfortunate man. But I could learn nothing; nobody knew anything whatever about the matter, and so I became convinced that it amounted to little. Now—behold! I discover that I was deceived. Or—perhaps there still may be a mistake."

Blaze Jones thrust his daughter aside and advanced toward the speaker. "There's no mistake," he declared, belligerently. "I don't make mistakes when I go grave-robbin'. Don Ricardo was shot by your men. He had five thousand dollars on him, or he should have had, and he was an American citizen. Your Colonel Blanco covered the body, but he'll have a hell of a job coverin' the facts. It's time we came to a showdown with your murderin' outfit, and I aim to see if we've got a government in this country."

"Heaven guided my hand," devoutly breathed the general. "It is regrettable that you used this means when a word to me would have served the purpose, for—it is no trivial matter to desecrate a Mexican graveyard. My country, too, has a government. An officer of the State of Texas, under arms, has crossed the Rio Grande. What does that mean?"

Captain Evans had a sense of humor; Longorio's ominous words amused him. "Say, general, it ain't the first time," he chortled. "And you're an officer, too, ain't you? You're in Texas at this minute, and I'll bet if I frisked you I'd find that you was under arms." The Mexican understood English sufficiently well to grasp the significance of these words. After a moment's consideration, therefore, he modified his threatening tone.

"But my mission was friendly. I had no criminal purpose," he said, mildly. "However—perhaps one offense condones the other. At any rate, we must have no international complications. There is a more practical side to the matter: if Don Ricardo Guzman met his death in Mexico there will be a rigid investigation, I assure you."

Evans agreed. "That's fair! And I'll make a bargain with you: you keep still and so 'll we. We never aimed for this affair to get out, anyhow. I reckon these men"—he indicated Lewis and his followers—"ain't liable to talk much."

The two Guzman boys, greatly moved, returned to announce that they had indeed identified their father's body, and Longorio could not well refuse to accept their evidence.

"Very well," said he. "I am indebted to you. Since there is nothing more to be said, apparently, I will return to Romero." With a bow to Mrs. Austin, who had silently watched the play of these opposing motives, he turned away, and Tad Lewis followed him.

But Dave Law had recognized Adolfo Urbina in the crowd, and, stepping forward, disarmed him, saying:

"Adolfo, there's a warrant for you, so I'll just take you in."

For a moment Adolfo was inclined to resist, but, thinking better of it, he yielded with bad grace, bitterly regretting the curiosity which had prompted him to remain to the end of this interesting affair.

Tad Lewis gave him some comfort. "Never mind, Adolfo," he said. "They can't prove anything on you, and I'll go your bail. Ed Austin knows where you was the day that stock was stole." He and his two remaining men moved toward their automobile, and a moment later the vehicle went clattering away up the thicket road.

So ended the attempt to foil the return of Ricardo Guzman's body to Texas soil.

When Alaire came to look for her husband he was gone.

XX

SUPERSTITIONS AND CERTAINTIES

THE sensation caused by Ricardo Guzman's disappearance was as nothing to that which followed the recovery of his body. By the next afternoon it was known from Mexico to the Canadian border that the old ranchman had been shot by Mexican soldiers in Romero. It was reported that a party of Americans had invaded foreign soil and snatched Ricardo's remains from under the nose of General Longorio. But there all reliable information ceased. Just how the rescue had been effected, by whom it had been done, what reasons had prompted it, were a mystery. With the first story the newspapers printed a terse telegram, signed by Captain Evans and addressed to the Governor of Texas, which read:

"Ranger force crossed Rio Grande and brought back the body of Ricardo Guzman."

This message created tremendous enthusiasm, for the Texas Rangers have ever stood for prompt and decisive action; but two hours after the publication of this despatch there came a sharp inquiry from Washington, and on the heels of that the State House at Austin denied the receipt of any such message.

When this denial was in turn made public, the newspapers demanded to know who had performed this sensational exploit. One rumor had it that the sons of Ricardo Guzman had risked their lives to insure their father

Christian burial. This was amplified by a touching pen-picture of the rancher's weeping family waiting at the bank of the Rio Grande, and an affecting account of the grief of the beautiful Guzman girls. It mattered not that there were no daughters.

In other quarters the expedition was credited to members of a secret order to which Ricardo had belonged; from a third source came a statement that the Guzman family had hired a band of Mexicans to exhume the body, so that proof of death might be sufficient to satisfy an insurance company in which the rancher had held a policy. Even at Jonesville there were conflicting rumors.

But, whatever the facts of the rescue, it was generally recognized that the result had been to bring on a crisis in the affairs of the two nations. People declared that since the outrage was now proven the next move was the duty of the State Department at Washington. Therefore, when several days passed and nothing was done, a wide-spread feeling of indignation grew. What mattered these diplomatic communications between the two governments? it was asked. Why wait for another investigation by General Longorio?

Strong influences, however, were at work to prevent that very outcome for which the people of Texas prayed. During the delay there arose a report that Ricardo Guzman had borne an evil reputation, and that he had been so actively associated with the Rebel cause as to warrant punishment by the Federal government. Moreover, a legal question as to his American citizenship was raised—a question which seemed to have important bearing upon the case.

Public interest is short-lived; few living men can hold it more than a day or two, and it reckons no dead man worthy of more than an obituary notice. Other Mexican offenses, equally grave, had failed to stir the Administration to definite action; the death of this obscure border ranchman did not seem to weigh very heavily in Washington. Thus in the course of time the Guzman incident was in a fair way of being officially forgotten and forgiven.

Of course the people of Texas did not forget, nor did those who had personally known Ricardo forgive. Dave Law, for instance, felt bitter over the matter, for he had counted upon prompt and definite results. A little pressure, properly applied, would have wrung the truth from Colonel Blanco and fastened some measure of guilt upon the men who had actually arranged the murder. Dave did not doubt Tad Lewis's part in it, but there was only one source from which pressure could be brought, and when this failed he found his further efforts blocked. There remained to him only the consolation of knowing that he had in a measure squared his account with old Ricardo.

But there were several persons who felt intense relief at the course events had taken, and among these was Alaire Austin. In the days following that midnight expedition she had had ample time in which to meditate upon her husband's actions. "Young Ed" had taken advantage of the confusion to slip out of the crowd and escape in his roadster, and when Alaire arrived at Las Palmas she had found that he was gone, leaving behind no word as to when he would return. It seemed probable that he had fled to San Antonio, there to remain until interest in the Guzman matter had abated. If Ed was relieved to escape the immediate consequences of his connection with the affair, his wife was no less thankful for his absence, since it left her free to think and to plan. Their relations were becoming constantly more difficult; she realized that it was impossible for her to go on in this way much longer. Before leaving Ed had again rifled the safe, thus disregarding for a second time his explicit agreement with his wife. Of course, he was welcome to whatever money he needed, even in excess of his allowance; but his act showed his weak sense of honor and strengthened Alaire's conviction that he was in every way rapidly deteriorating. As yet she could not believe him really wicked at heart—he had many qualities which were above the average—nor could she convince herself that he had been criminally involved in Tad Lewis's schemes. And yet, what other explanation could there be? Ed's behavior had been extraordinary; his evident terror at news of Dave Law's expedition, his conversation with Tad Lewis over the telephone, his subsequent actions at the river, all seemed to indicate that he had some vital interest in maintaining the mystery of Guzman's death. What could it be?

Suspicions like these were extremely disturbing. In spite of herself Alaire began to think more seriously about that separation which Ed had so frequently offered her. Her whole nature, it is true, recoiled at the thought of divorce; it was a thing utterly repugnant to her sentiment and her creed—a thing that stood for notoriety, gossip, scandal. Deep in her heart she felt that divorce was wicked, for marriage to her had always meant a sacred and unbreakable bond. And yet there seemed to be no alternative. She wished Ed would go away—leave her quietly and for ever, so that she might live out her empty life in seclusion—but that, of course, he would never do.

Such longings were not strangers to Alaire; they were old and persistent enemies; but of late the prospect of a loveless, childless future was growing more and more unbearable. Even her day dreams failed to give their customary relief; those imaginary figures with whom she took counsel were strangely unresponsive.

She had told Paloma Jones about her dream-children, but she had not confessed the existence of another and a far more intimate creature of her brain—one who occupied the place Ed Austin should have held. There was such a person, however, and Alaire called him her dream-husband. Now this man's physical aspect was never long the same; it altered according to her changing ideals or to the impression left by new acquaintances; nevertheless, he was in some ways the most real and the most tangible of all her pale romantic fancies. No one who has watched a solitary child at play can doubt that it sees and hears playmates invisible to others. Alaire Austin, in the remotest depths of her being, was still a child. Of late her prince had assumed new characteristics and a new form. He was no longer any one of the many shapes he had been; he was more like the spirit of the out-of-doors—a strong-limbed, deep-chested, sun-bronzed creature, with a strain of gipsy blood that called to hers. He was moody, yet tender, roughly masculine, and yet possessed of the gentleness and poetry of a girl. He was violent tempered; he was brave; he rode a magnificent bay mare that worshiped him, as did all animals.

During one of these introspective periods Alaire telephoned Dave Law, arguing to herself that she must learn more about her husband's connection with the Lewis gang. Dave arrived even sooner than she had expected. She made him dine with her, and they spent the evening on the dim-lit gallery. In the course of their conversation Alaire discovered that Dave, too, had a hidden side of his nature; that he possessed an imagination, and with it a quaint, whimsical, exploratory turn of mind which enabled him to talk interestingly of many things and many places. On this particular evening he was anything but the man of iron she had known—until she ventured to speak of Ed. Then he closed up like a trap. He was almost gruff in his refusal to say a word about her husband.

Because of Ed's appropriation of the ranch cash, Alaire found it necessary a few days later to go to the bank, and, feeling the need of exercise, she rode her horse Montrose. When her errands had been attended to, she suddenly decided to call on Paloma Jones. It was years since she had voluntarily done such a thing; the very impulse surprised her.

Paloma, it happened, was undergoing that peculiar form of feminine torture known as a "fitting"; but insecurely basted, pinned, and tucked as she was, she came flying down to the gate to meet her visitor.

Alaire was introduced to Mrs. Strange, the dressmaker, a large, acidulous brunette, with a mouthful of pins; and then, when Paloma had given herself once more into the seamstress's hands, the two friends gossiped.

Since Mrs. Strange was the first capable dressmaker who had ever come to Jonesville, Paloma had closed her eyes and plunged with reckless extravagance. Now the girl insisted upon a general exhibition of her new wardrobe, a sort of grand fashion review, for the edification of her caller, in the course of which she tried on all her dresses.

Paloma was petite and well proportioned, and the gowns were altogether charming. Alaire was honest in her praise, and Paloma's response was one of whole-hearted pleasure. The girl beamed. Never before had she been so admired, never until this moment had she adored a person as she adored Mrs. Austin, whose every suggestion as to fit and style was acted upon, regardless of Mrs. Strange.

"I don't know what Dad will say when he gets the bill for these dresses," Paloma confessed.

"Your father is a mighty queer man," Mrs. Strange observed. "I haven't so much as laid eyes on him."

Paloma nodded. "Yes. And he's getting more peculiar all the time; I can't make out what ails him."

"Where is he now?" asked Alaire.

"Heaven knows! Out in the barn or under the house." Taking advantage of the dressmaker's momentary absence from the room, Paloma continued in a whisper: "I wish you'd talk to Dad and see what you make of him. He's absolutely—queer. Mrs. Strange seems to have a peculiar effect on him. Why, it's almost as if—"

"What?"

"Well, I suppose I'm foolish, but—I'm beginning to believe in spells. You know, Mrs. Strange's husband is a sort of—necromancer."

"How silly!"

There was no further opportunity for words, as the woman reappeared at that instant; but a little later Alaire went in search of Blaze, still considerably mystified. As she neared the farm buildings she glimpsed a man's figure hastily disappearing into the barn. The figure bore a suspicious resemblance to Blaze Jones, yet when she followed he was nowhere to be seen. Now this was curious, for Texas barns are less pretentious than those of the North, and this one was little more than a carriage-house and a shelter for agricultural implements.

"Mr. Jones!" Alaire called. She repeated Blaze's name several times; then something stirred. The door of a harness closet opened cautiously, and out of the blackness peered Paloma's father. He looked more owlish than ever behind his big, gold-rimmed spectacles. "What in the world are you doing in there?" she cried.

Blaze emerged, blinking. He was dusty and perspiring.

"Hello, Miz Austin!" he saluted her with a poor assumption of breeziness. "I was fixin' some harness, but I'm right glad to see you."

Alaire regarded him quizzically. "What made you hide?" she asked.

"Hide? Who, me?"

"I saw you dodge in here like a—gopher."

Blaze confessed. "I reckon I've got the willies. Every woman I see looks like that dam' dressmaker."

"Paloma was telling me about you. Why do you hate her so?"

"I don't know 's I hate her, but her and her husband have put a jinx on me. They're the worst people I ever see, Miz Austin."

"You don't really believe in such things?"

Blaze dusted off a seat for his visitor, saying: "I never did till lately, but now I'm worse than a plantation nigger. I tell you there's things in this world we don't *sabe*. I wish you'd get Paloma to fire her. I've tried and failed. I wish you'd tell her those dresses are rotten."

"But they're very nice; they're lovely; and I've just been complimenting her. Now what has this woman done to you?"

It seemed impossible that a man of Blaze Jones's character could actually harbor crude superstitions, and yet there was no mistaking his earnestness when he said:

"I ain't sure whether she's to blame, or her husband, but misfortune has folded me to herself."

"How?"

"Well, I'm sick."

"You don't look it."

"I don't exactly feel it, either, but I am. I don't sleep good, my heart's actin' up, I've got rheumatism, my stomach feels like I'd swallowed something alive—"

"You're smoking too much," Alaire affirmed, with conviction.

But skepticism aroused Blaze's indignation. With elaborate sarcasm he retorted: "I reckon that's why my best team of mules run away and dragged me through a ten-acre patch of grass burrs—on my belly, eh? It's a wonder I wasn't killed. I reckon I smoked so much that I give a tobacco heart to the best three-year-old bull in my pasture! Well, I smoked him to death, all right. Probably it was nicotine poisonin' that killed twenty acres of my cotton, too; and maybe if I'd cut out Bull Durham I'd have floated that bond issue on the irrigation ditch. But I was wedded to cigarettes, so my banks are closin' down on me. Sure! That's what a man gets for smokin'."

"And do you attribute all these misfortunes to Paloma's dressmaker?"

The man nodded gloomily. "That ain't half! Everything goes wrong. I'm scared to pack a weapon for fear I'll injure myself. Why, I've carried a bowie-knife in my bootleg ever since I was a babe in arms, you might say; but the other day I jabbed myself with it and nearly got blood-poisonin'. The very first time I ever laid eyes on this man and his wife a great misfortune overtook me, and ever since they come to Jonesville I've had a close squeeze to make a live of it. This fellow Strange, with his fortune-tellin' and his charms and his conjures, has hocus-pocussed the whole neighborhood. He's gettin' rich off of the Mexicans. He knows more secrets than a priest; he tells 'em whether their sweethearts love 'em, whether a child is goin' to be a boy or a girl, and how to invest their money."

"He is nothing more than a circus fakir, Mr. Jones."

"Yes'm! Just the same, these Greasers 'd vote him into the legislature if he asked 'em. Why, he knows who fetched back Ricardo Guzman's body! He told me so."

"Really?" Alaire looked up quickly, then the smile left her face. After a moment she said, "Perhaps he could tell me something that I want to know?"

"Now don't you get him started," Blaze cautioned, hastily, "or he'll put a spell on you like he did on me."

"I want to know what Ed had to do with the Guzman affair."

Blaze shook his head slowly. "Well, he's mixed up somehow with Lewis. Dave thinks Tad was at the bottom of the killin', and he hoped to prove it on him; but our government won't do anything, and he's stumped for the time bein'. I don't know any more about Ed's dealin's than you do, Miz Austin: all I know is that I got a serpent in my household and I can't get shed of her. I've got a lapful of troubles of my own. I've ordered Paloma to let that woman go, but, pshaw! It's like a bowlegged man drivin' a shoat — there ain't any headin' Paloma off when her mind's made up. You mark what I say, that female spider 'll sew venom into those dresses. I never seen a woman with a mustache that was any good. Look here!" Blaze drew a well-thumbed pack of playing-cards from his pocket. "Shuffle 'em, and I'll prove what I say. If I don't turn up a dark woman three times out of five I'll eat that saddle-blanket, dry."

Alaire shuffled the deck, and Blaze cut the cards. Sure enough, he exposed the queen of spades.

"What did I tell you? There's the bearded lady herself! Now I'll shuffle and you cut."

Alaire smilingly followed directions; she separated the deck into three piles, after which Jones interpreted the oracle.

"You got a good fortune, Miz Austin. There's a light man comin' to your house, danger, and—marriage. You're goin' to marry a light man."

Alaire's laughter rang out unaffectedly. "Now you see how utterly absurd it is."

"Maybe it is, and maybe it ain't." From another pocket Jones drew a small volume entitled *The Combination Fortune-Teller and Complete Dictionary of Dreams.* Alaire reached to take it, and the book dropped to the floor; then, as she stooped, Blaze cried: "Wait! Hit it three times on the floor and say, 'Money! Money! Money!'"

As Alaire was running over the pages of the book, one of Blaze's ranch-hands appeared in the door to ask him a question. When the fellow had gone his employer rose and tiptoed after him; then he spat through his crossed fingers in the direction the man had taken.

"Now what does that mean?" Alaire inquired.

"Didn't you see? He's cross-eyed."

"This is too occult for me," she declared, rising. "But—I'm interested in what you say about Mr. Strange. If the Mexicans tell him so much, perhaps he can tell me something. I do hope you have no more misfortunes."

"You stay to supper," Blaze urged, hospitably. "I'll be in as soon as that tarantula's gone."

But Alaire declined. After a brief chat with Paloma she remounted Montrose and prepared for the homeward ride. At the gate, however, she met Dave Law on his new mare, and when Dave had learned the object of her visit to Jonesville he insisted upon accompanying her.

"You have enough money in those saddle-bags to tempt some of our very best citizens," he told her. "If you don't mind, I'll just be your bodyguard."

"Very well," she smiled; "but to make perfectly sure of our safety, cross your fingers and spit."

"Eh?" Seeing the amusement in her eyes, he declared: "You've been talking to Blaze. Well, last night I dreamed I was eating chestnuts, and he told me I was due for a great good fortune. You see, there's something in it, after all."

"And you must be the 'light man' I discovered in the cards. Blaze declared you were coming to my house." They jogged along side by side, and Law thanked his lucky stars for the encounter.

"Did Blaze tell you how he came to meet the Stranges?"

"No. He only said they had brought him bad luck from the start."

Dave grinned; then, in treacherous disregard of his promise to Jones, he recounted the tale of that disastrous defeat on the beach at Galveston. When he had finished the story, which he ingeniously elaborated, Alaire was doubled over her saddle. It was the first spontaneous laugh she had had for days, and it seemed to banish her worries magically. Alaire was not of a melancholy temperament; gaiety was natural to her, and it had required many heartaches, many disappointments, to darken her blithe spirit.

Nor was Dave Law a person of the comic type; yet he was a gloom-dispeller, and now that Alaire was beginning to know him better she felt a certain happy restfulness in his company.

The ride was long, and the two proceeded leisurely, stopping now and then to talk or to admire the banks of wild flowers beside the road. No country is richer in spring blooms than is South Texas. The cactus had nearly done blooming now, and its ever-listening ears were absurdly warted with fruit; gorgeous carpets of bluebonnets were spread beside the ditches, while the air above was filled with thousands of yellow butterflies, like whirling, wind-blown petals of the prickly-pear blossom. Montrose and Montrosa enjoyed the journey also; it was just the mode of traveling to please equine hearts, for there were plenty of opportunities to nibble at the juicy grass and to drink at the little pools. Then, too, there were mad, romping races during which the riders laughed and shouted.

It was Law who finally discovered that they had somehow taken the wrong road. The fact that Alaire had failed to notice this gave him a sudden thrill. It aroused in his mind such a train of dizzy, drunken speculations that for some time following the discovery he jogged silently at his companion's side.

It was early dusk when they reached Las Palmas; it was nearly midnight when Dave threw his leg across his saddle and started home.

Alaire's parting words rang sweetly in his ears: "This has been the pleasantest day I can remember."

The words themselves meant little, but Dave had caught a wistful undertone in the speaker's voice, and fancied he had seen in her eyes a queer, half-frightened expression, as of one just awakened.

José Sanchez had beheld Dave Law at the Las Palmas table twice within a few days. He spent this evening laboriously composing a letter to his friend and patron, General Luis Longorio.

XXI

AN AWAKENING

TIME was when Phil Strange boasted that he and his wife had played every fair-ground and seaside amusement-park from Coney Island to Galveston. In his battered wardrobe-trunks were parts of old costumes, scrap-books of clippings, and a goodly collection of lithographs, some advertising the supernatural powers of "Professor Magi, Sovereign of the Unseen World," and others the accomplishments of "Mlle. Le Garde, Renowned Serpent Enchantress." In these gaudy portraits of "Magi the Mystic" no one would have recognized Phil Strange. And even more difficult would it have been to trace a resemblance between Mrs. Strange and the blond, bushy-headed "Mlle. Le Garde" of the posters. Nevertheless, the likenesses at one time had been considered not too flattering, and Phil treasured them as evidences of imperishable distinction.

But the Stranges had tired of public life. For a long time the wife had confessed to a lack of interest in her vocation which amounted almost to a repugnance. Snake-charming, she had discovered, was far from an ideal profession for a woman of refinement. It possessed unpleasant features, and even such euphemistic titles as "Serpent Enchantress" and "Reptilian Mesmerist" failed to rob the calling of a certain odium, a suggestion of vulgarity in the minds of the more discriminating. This had become so distressing to Mrs. Strange's finer sensibilities that she had voiced a yearning to forsake the platform and pit for something more congenial, and finally she had prevailed upon Phil to make a change.

The step had not been taken without misgivings, but a benign Providence had watched over the pair. Mrs. Strange was a natural seamstress, and luck had directed her and Phil to a community which was not only in need of a good dressmaker, but peculiarly ripe for the talents of a soothsayer. Phil, too, had intended to embrace a new profession; but he had soon discovered that Jonesville offered better financial returns to a man of his accepted gifts than did the choicest of seaside concessions, and therefore he had resumed his old calling under a slightly different guise. Before long he acknowledged himself well pleased with the new environment, for his wife was far happier in draping dress goods upon the figures of her customers than in hanging python folds about her own, and he found his own fame growing with every day. His mediumistic gifts came into general demand. The country people journeyed miles to consult him, and Blaze Jones's statement that they confided in the fortune-teller as they would have confided in a priest was scarcely an exaggeration. Phil did indeed become the repository for confessions of many sorts.

Contrary to Blaze's belief, however, Strange was no Prince of Darkness, and took little joy in some of the secrets forced upon him. Phil was a good man in his way—so conscientious that certain information he acquired weighed him down with a sense of unpleasant responsibility. Chancing to meet Dave Law one day, he determined to relieve himself of at least one troublesome burden.

But Dave was not easily approachable. He met the medium's allusions to the occult with contemptuous amusement, nor would he consent to a private "reading." Strange grew almost desperate enough to speak the ungarnished truth.

"You'd better pay a little attention to me," he grieved; "I've got a message to you from the 'Unseen World.'"

"Charges 'collect,' I reckon," the Ranger grinned.

Strange waved aside the suggestion. "It came unbidden and I pass it on for what it's worth." As Dave turned away he added, hastily, "It's about a skeleton in the chaparral, and a red-haired woman."

Dave stopped; he eyed the speaker curiously. "Go on," said he.

But a public street, Strange explained, was no place for psychic discussions. If Dave cared to come to his room, where the surroundings were favorable to thought transference, and where Phil's spirit control could have a chance to make itself felt, they would interrogate the "Unseen Forces" further. Dave agreed. When they were alone in the fortune-telling "parlor," he sat back while the medium closed his eyes and prepared to explore the Invisible. After a brief delay Phil began:

"I see a great many things—that woman I told you about, and three men. One of 'em is you, the other two is Mexicans. You're at a water-hole in the mesquite. Now there's a shooting scrape; I see the body of a dead man." The speaker became silent; evidently his cataleptic vision was far from perfect. But he soon began to drone again. "Now I behold a stranger at the same water-hole. He's alone—he's looking for something. He rides in circles. He's off his horse and bending over— What? A skeleton! Yes, it's the skeleton of one of them other Mexicans." Strange's voice became positively sepulchral as his spirit control took fuller possession of his earthly shell and as his visions resolved themselves into clearer outline. "See! He swears an oath to avenge. And now —the scene changes. Everything dissolves. I'm in a mansion; and the red-haired woman comes toward me. Over her head floats that skeleton—"

Dave broke in crisply. "All right! Let's get down to cases. What's on your mind, Strange?"

The psychic simulated a shudder—a painful contortion, such as any one might suffer if rudely jerked out of the spirit world.

"Eh? What was I—? There! You've broke the connection," he declared. "Did I tell you anything?"

"No. But evidently you can."

"I'm sorry. They never come back."

"Rot!"

Phil was hurt, indignant. With some stiffness he explained the danger of interrupting a séance of this sort, but Law remained obdurate.

"You can put over that second-sight stuff with the Greasers," he declared, sharply, "but not with me. So, José Sanchez has been to see you and you want to warn me. Is that it?"

"I don't know any such party," Strange protested. He eyed his caller for a moment; then with an abrupt change of manner he complained: "Say, Bo! What's the matter with you? I've got a reputation to protect, and I do things my own way. I'm getting set to slip you something, and you try to make me look like a sucker. Is that any way to act?"

"I prefer to talk to you when your eyes are open. I know all about—"

"You don't know nothing about anything," snapped the other. "José's got it in for Mrs. Austin."

"You said you didn't know him."

"Well, I don't. He's never been to see me in his life, but—his sweetheart has. Rosa Morales comes regular."

"Rosa! José's sweetheart!"

"Yes. Her and José have joined out together since you shot Panfilo, and they're framing something."

"What, for instance?"

The fortune-teller hesitated. "I only wish I knew," he said, slowly. "It looks to me like a killing."

Dave nodded. "Probably is. José would like to get me, and of course the girl—"

"Oh, they don't aim to get you. You ain't the one they're after."

"No? Who then?"

"I don't know nothing definite. In this business, you understand, a fellow has to put two and two together. Sometimes I have to make one and two count four. I have to tell more'n I'm told; I have to shoot my game on the wing, for nobody tells me any more'n they dast. All the same, I'm sure José ain't carving no epitaph for you. From what I've dug out of Rosa, he's acting for a third party—somebody with pull and a lot of coin—but who it is I don't know. Anyhow, he's cooking trouble for the Austins, and I want to stand from under."

Now that the speaker had dropped all pretense, he answered Dave's questions without evasion and told what he knew. It was not much, to Dave's way of thinking, but it was enough to give cause for thought, and when the men finally parted it was with the understanding that Strange would promptly communicate any further intelligence on this subject that came his way.

On the following day Dave's duties called him to Brownsville, where court was in session. He had planned to leave by the morning train; but as he continued to meditate over Strange's words he decided that, before going, he ought to advise Alaire of the fellow's suspicions in order that she might discharge José Sanchez and in other ways protect herself against his possible spite. Since the matter was one that could not well be talked over by telephone, Dave determined to go in person to Las Palmas that evening. Truth to say, he was hungry to see Alaire. By this time he had almost ceased to combat the feeling she aroused in him, and it was in obedience to an impulse far stronger than friendly anxiety that he hired a machine and, shortly after dark, took the river road.

The Fates are malicious jades. They delight in playing ill-natured pranks upon us. Not content with spinning and measuring and cutting the threads of our lives to suit themselves, they must also tangle the skein, causing us to cut capers to satisfy their whims.

At no time since meeting Alaire had Dave Law been more certain of his moral strength than on this evening; at no time had his grip upon himself seemed firmer. Nor had Alaire the least reason to doubt her self-control. Dave, to be sure, had appealed to her fancy and her interest; in fact, he so dominated her thoughts that the imaginary creature whom she called her dream-husband had gradually taken on his physical likeness. But the idea that she was in any way enamoured of him had never entered her mind; that she could ever be tempted to yield to him, to be false to her ideals of wifehood, was inconceivable. In such wise do the Fates amuse themselves.

Alaire had gone to her favorite after-dinner refuge, a nook on one of the side-galleries, where there was a wide, swinging wicker couch; and there in a restful obscurity fragrant with unseen flowers she had prepared to spend the evening with her dreams.

She did not hear Dave's automobile arrive. Her first intimation of his presence came with the sound of his heel upon the porch. When he appeared it was almost like the materialization of her uppermost thought—quite as if a figure from her fancy had stepped forth full clad.

She rose and met him, smiling. "How did you know I wanted to see you?" she inquired.

Dave took her hand and looked down at her, framing a commonplace reply. But for some reason the words lay unspoken upon his tongue. Alaire's informal greeting, her parted lips, the welcoming light in her eyes, had sent them flying. It seemed to him that the dim half-light which illumined this nook emanated from her face and her person, that the fragrance which came to his nostrils was the perfume of her breath, and at the prompting of these thoughts all his smothered longings rose as if at a signal. As mutinous prisoners in a jail delivery overpower their guards, so did Dave's long-repressed emotions gain the upper hand of him now, and so swift was their uprising that he could not summon more than a feeble, panicky resistance.

The awkwardness of the pause which followed Alaire's inquiry strengthened the rebellious impulses within him, and quite unconsciously his friendly grasp upon her fingers tightened. For her part, as she saw this sudden change sweep over him, her own face altered and she felt something within her breast leap into life. No woman could have failed to read the meaning of his sudden agitation, and, strange to say, it worked a similar state of feeling in Alaire. She strove to control herself and to draw away, but instead found that her hand had answered his, and that her eyes were flashing recognition of his look. All in an instant she realized how deathly tired of her own struggle she had become, and experienced a reckless impulse to cast away all restraint and blindly meet his first advance. She had no time to question her yearnings; she seemed to understand only that this man offered her rest and security; that in his arms lay sanctuary.

To both it seemed that they stood there silently, hand in hand, for a very long time, though in reality there was scarcely a moment of hesitation on the part of either. A drunken, breathless instant of uncertainty, then Alaire was on Dave's breast, and his strength, his ardor, his desire, was throbbing through her. Her bare arms were about his neck; a sigh, the token of utter surrender, fluttered from her throat. She raised her face to his and their lips melted together.

For a time they were all alone in the universe, the center of all ecstasy. Dave was whispering wild incoherencies as Alaire lay in his embrace, her limbs relaxed, her flesh touching his, her body clinging to his.

"Dream-man!" she murmured.

As consciousness returns after a swoon, so did realization return to Alaire Austin. Faintly, uncertainly at first, then with a swift, strong effort she pushed herself out of Dave's reluctant arms. They stood apart, frightened. Dave's gaze was questioning. Alaire began to tremble and to struggle with her breath.

"Are we—mad?" she gasped. "What have we done?"

"There's no use fighting. It was here—it was bound to come out. Oh, Alaire—!"

"Don't!" She shook her head, and, avoiding his outstretched hands, went to the edge of the veranda and leaned weakly against a pillar, with her head in the crook of her arm. Dave followed her, but the words he spoke were scarcely intelligible.

Finally she raised her face to his: "No! It is useless to deny it—now that we know. But I didn't know, until a moment ago."

"I've known, all the time—ever since the first moment I saw you," he told her, hoarsely. "To me you're all there is; nothing else matters. And you love me! God! I wonder if I'm awake."

"Dream-man," she repeated, more slowly. "Oh, why did you come so late?"

"So late?"

"Yes. We must think it out, the best way we can. I—wonder what you think of me?"

"You must know." There's no need for excuses; there's nothing to explain, except the miracle that such great happiness could come to a fellow like me."

"Happiness? It means anything but that. I was miserable enough before, what shall I do now?"

"Why, readjust your life," he cried, roughly. "Surely you won't hesitate after this?"

But Alaire did not seem to hear him. She was staring out into the night again. "What a failure I must be!" she murmured, finally. "I suppose I should have seen this coming, but—I didn't. And in his house, too! This dress is his, and these jewels—everything!" She held up her hands and stared curiously at the few rings she wore, as if seeing them for the first time. "How does that make you feel?"

Dave stirred; there was resentment in his voice when he answered: "Your husband has sacrificed his claim to you, as everybody knows. To my mind he has lost his rights. You're mine, mine! By God!" He waved a vigorous gesture of defiance. "I'll take you away from him at any cost. I'll see that he gives you up, somehow. You're all I have."

"Of course the law provides a way, but you wouldn't, couldn't, understand how I feel about divorce." The mere mention of the word was difficult and caused Alaire to clench her hands. "We're both too shaken to talk sanely now, so let's wait—"

"There's something you must understand before we go any further," Dave insisted. "I'm poor; I haven't a thing I can call my own, so I'm not sure I have any right to take you away from all this." He turned a hostile eye upon their surroundings. "Most people would say that I've simply wasted my life. Perhaps I have—that depends upon the way you look at it and upon what you consider worth while—anyhow, all I can offer you is love—" He broke off momentarily as if his breath had suddenly failed him. "Greater love, it seems to me, than any woman ever had."

"Money means so little, and it's so easy to be happy without it," Alaire told him. "But I'm not altogether poor. Of course, everything here is Ed's, but I have enough. All my life I've had everything except the very thing you offer—and how I've longed for that! How I've envied other people! Do you think I'll be allowed, somehow, to have it?"

"Yes! I've something to say about that. You gave me the right when you gave me that kiss."

Alaire shook her head. "I'm not sure. It seems easy now, while you are here, but how will it seem later? I'm in no condition at this minute to reason. Perhaps, as you say, it is all a dream; perhaps this feeling I have is just a passing frenzy."

Dave laughed softly, confidently. "It's too new yet for you to understand, but wait. It is frenzy, witchery—yes, and more. To-morrow, and every day after, it will grow and grow and grow! Trust me, I've watched it in myself."

"So you cared for me from the very first?" Alaire questioned. It was the woman's curiosity, the woman's hunger to hear over and over again that truth which never fails to thrill and yet never fully satisfies.

"Oh, even before that, I think! When you came to my fire that evening in the chaparral I knew every line of your face, every movement of your body, every tone of your voice, as a man knows and recognizes his ideal. But it took time for me to realize all you meant to me."

Alaire nodded. "Yes, and it must have been the same with me." She met his eyes frankly, but when he reached toward her she held him away. "No, dear. Not yet, not again, not until we have the right. It would be better for us both if you went away now."

"No, no! Oh, I have so much to say! I've been dumb all my life, and you've just opened my lips."

"Please! After I've decided what to do—once I feel that I can control myself better—I'll send for you. But you must promise not to come until then, for you would only make it harder."

It required all Dave's determination to force himself to obey her wish, and the struggle nearly kept him from recalling the original object of his visit. Remembering, he tried to tell Alaire what he had learned from Phil Strange; but so broken and so unconvincing was his recital that he doubted if she understood in the least what he was talking about.

At last he took her hand and kissed her wrist, just over her pulse, as if to speed a message to her heart, then into her rosy palm he whispered a tender something that thrilled her.

She stood white, motionless, against the dim illumination of the porch until he had gone, and not until the last sound of his motor had died away did she stir. Then she pressed her own lips to the palm he had caressed and walked slowly to her room.

XXII

WHAT ELLSWORTH HAD TO SAY

ON his way to Brownsville the next morning Dave found himself still somewhat dazed by his sudden happiness; the more he thought of it the more wonderful it seemed. During the day he went through his court duties like a man in a trance. Such joy as this was unbelievable; he felt as if he must tell the world about it. He well understood Alaire's repugnance to divorce, but he was sure that he could overcome it, if indeed her own truer understanding of herself did not relieve him of that necessity; for at this moment his desires were of a heat sufficient to burn away all obstacles, no matter how solid. It seemed, therefore, that the future was all sunshine.

He had no opportunity of speaking with Judge Ellsworth until court adjourned. Then the judge took him by the arm, with that peculiarly flattering assumption of intimacy of which he was master, and led the way toward his office, inquiring meanwhile for news of Jonesville. Dave's high spirits surprised him and finally impelled him to ask the cause. When Dave hinted unmistakably at the truth, Ellsworth exclaimed, with a sharp stare of curiosity:

"See here! You haven't forgotten what I told you that night on the train?"

"What? Yes, I had forgotten."

"You promised to tell me if you thought seriously about marriage."

"Very well, then; I'm telling you now."

"Do you mean that, Dave?"

"Of course I do. But don't look at me as if I'd confessed to arson or burglary. Listen, Judge! If you have good taste in jewelry, I'll let you help me select the ring."

But Judge Ellsworth continued to stare, and then muttered uncertainly: "You're such a joker—"

Dave assumed a show of irony. "Your congratulations overwhelm me. You look as if you were about to begin the reading of the will."

"I want to hear about this right away." Ellsworth smiled faintly. "Can you come to my office to-night, where we can be alone?"

Dave agreed to the appointment and went his way with a feeling of amusement. Old folks are usually curious, he reflected; and they are prone to presume upon the privileges that go with age. In this instance, however, it might be well to make a clean breast of the affair, since Ellsworth was Alaire's attorney, and would doubtless be selected to secure her divorce.

The judge was waiting when Dave called after supper, but for some time he maintained a flow of conversation relating to other things than the one they had met to discuss. At last, however, he appeared to summon his determination; he cleared his throat and settled himself in his chair—premonitory signs unusual in a man of Ellsworth's poise and self-assurance.

"I reckon you think I'm trying to mix up in something that doesn't concern me," he began; "and perhaps I am. Maybe you'll make me wish I'd minded my own business—that's what usually happens. I remember once, out of pure chivalry, trying to stop a fellow from beating his wife. Of course they both turned on me—as they always do. I went to the hospital for a week, and lost a profitable divorce case. However, we try to do our duty as we see it."

This was anything but a promising preamble; Dave wondered, too, at his friend's obvious nervousness.

"So you've found the girl, eh?" the judge went on.

"Yes."

"Are you accepted? I mean, have you asked her to marry you?"

"Of course I have. That's about the first thing a fellow does."

Ellsworth shuffled the papers on his desk with an abstracted gaze, then said, slowly, "Dave—I don't think you ought to marry."

"So you told me once before. I suppose you mean I'm poor and a failure."

"Oh no! All men are failures until they marry. I'm thinking of what marriage means; of the new duties it brings, of the man's duty to himself, to the woman, and to society; I'm thinking of what lies inside of the man himself."

"Um-m! That's pretty vague."

"I've studied you a long time, Dave, and with a reason. I've studied heredity, too, and—you mustn't marry."

Law stirred in his chair and smiled whimsically. "I've done some studying along those lines, too, and I reckon I know myself pretty well. I've the usual faults, but—"

Ellsworth interrupted. "You don't know yourself at all, my boy. There's just the trouble. I'm the only man—living man, that is—who knows you." For the first time he looked directly at his caller, and now his lids were lifted until the eyes peered out bright, hard, and piercing; something in his face startled Dave. "I was your father's attorney and his friend. I know how he lived and how he died. I know—what killed him?"

"You mean, don't you, that you know who killed him?"

"I mean just what I say."

Dave leaned forward, studying the speaker curiously.

"Well, come through. What's on your mind?" he demanded, finally.

"The Guadalupes had to kill him, Dave."

"Had to? *Had* to? Why?"

"Don't you know? Don't you know anything about your family history?" Dave shook his head. "Well, then—he was insane."

"Insane?"

"Yes; violently."

"Really, I— Why—I suppose you know what you're talking about, but it sounds incredible."

"Yes, it must to you—especially since you never knew the facts. Very few people did know then, even at the time, for there were no newspapers in that part of Mexico; you, of course, were a boy at school in the United States. Nevertheless, it's true. That part of the story which I didn't know at the time I learned by talking with General Guadalupe and others. It was very shocking."

Dave's face was a study; his color had lessened slightly; he wet his lips. "This is news, of course," said he, "but it doesn't explain my mother's death. Who killed her, if not the Guadalupes?"

"Can't you guess? That's what I meant when I said they had to kill Frank Law." Ellsworth maintained his fixity of gaze, and when Dave started he nodded his head. "It's God's truth. The details were too—dreadful. Your father turned his hand against the woman he loved and—died a wife-killer. The Guadalupes had to destroy him like a mad dog. I'm sorry you had to learn the truth from me, my boy, but it seems necessary that I tell you. When I knew Frank Law he was like any other man, quick-tempered, a little too violent, perhaps, but apparently as sane as you or I, and yet the thing was there."

Dave rose from his chair and bent over the desk. "So *that's* what you've been driving at," he gasped. "That's what you meant when you said I shouldn't marry." He began to tremble now; his voice became hoarse with fury. "Now I understand. You're trying to tell me that—maybe I've got it in me, eh? Hell! *You're* crazy, not I. I'm all right. I reckon I know."

"*He* didn't know," Ellsworth said, quietly. "I doubt if he even suspected."

Dave struck the desk violently with his clenched fist. "Bosh! You're hipped on this heredity subject. Crazy! Why, you doddering old fool—" With an effort he calmed himself, realizing that he had shouted his last words. He turned away and made a circuit of the room before returning to face his friend. "I didn't mean to speak to you like that, Judge. You pulled this on me too suddenly, and I'm—upset. But it merely proves my own contention that I'm not Frank Law's son at all. I've always known it."

"How do you know it?"

"Don't you suppose I can tell?" In spite of himself Dave's voice rose again, but it was plain from the lawyer's expression that to a man of his training no mere conviction unsupported by proof had weight. This skepticism merely kept Dave's impatience at a white heat. "Very well, then," he argued, angrily, "let's say that I'm wrong and you're right. Let's agree that I am his son. What of it? What makes you think I've inherited—the damned thing? It isn't a disease. Me, insane? Rot!" He laughed harshly, took another uncertain turn around the room, then sank into his chair and buried his face in his hands.

Ellsworth was more keenly distressed than his hearer imagined; when next he spoke his voice was unusually gentle. "It *is* a disease, Dave, or worse, and there's no way of proving that you haven't inherited it. If there is the remotest possibility that you have—if you have the least cause to suspect—why, you couldn't marry and—

and bring children into the world, now could you? Ask yourself if you've shown any signs—?"

"Oh, I know what you mean. You've always said I go crazy when I'm—angry. Well, that's true. But it's nothing more than a villainous temper. I'm all right again afterward."

"I wasn't thinking so much of that. But are you sure it's altogether temper?" the judge insisted. "You don't merely lose control of yourself; you've told me more than once that you go completely out of your mind; that you see red and want to kill and—"

"Don't you?"

"I never felt the slightest desire to destroy, no matter how angry I chanced to be. I've always asserted that murderers, homicides, suicides, were irresponsible; that they were sick here." Ellsworth touched his forehead. "I can't see how any sane man can take his own or another's life, no matter what the provocation. But I'm not a doctor, and that's an extreme view, I know. Anyhow, you'll agree that if you have Frank Law's blood in your veins it won't do to marry."

"I haven't got it," the younger man groaned, his gaze turned sullenly downward. "Even granting that I have, that's no sign I'd ever—run amuck the way he did."

"You told me just now that you don't know your family history?"

"Yes. What little I've heard isn't very pretty nor very much to the family's credit. They were a bad lot, I believe."

"Frank Law had two brothers and a sister, had he not?"

"Yes. One of my uncles was a tough *hombre*. I'm told he notched his gun pretty well."

"He was about the worst man of his day. He was shot in Dodge City on one of his rampages."

Dave raised shocked and curious eyes. "You think he was crazy?"

"Most of those old-time gunmen would be so considered nowadays. Some unbelievable stories are told about that uncle of yours. The other one disappeared mysteriously."

"I believe so. He just walked away from his wife and family and business one day and was never heard of again."

Ellsworth seemed to consider this admission significant. "Now the sister, your aunt?"

"I think she's somewhere in the East; I never saw her."

"She is; she's an inmate of an institution the name and address of which I have here." Ellsworth thrust his finger into the loose pile of documents before him. Avoiding his caller's eyes he continued: "You can't very well ignore such a family history, Dave. I've never traced it back beyond the last generation, but you probably could if you tried."

In a voice hardly his own, Dave articulated: "God! This is—hideous."

"It is. I'd like to believe that you don't belong to the Laws, but I can't put much faith in that childhood fancy of yours. Run it down; convince yourself. But first go to the girl, whoever she is, and tell her the facts. If she's the right sort—"

"No, no!" The words were wrung from Dave's lips. "She knows too well how heredity acts; she's had one experience."

"Eh? You say she knows— Who is she, Dave? Don't tell me you mean—Alaire?"

Dave nodded.

"Damnation!" Ellsworth leaped to his feet and, striding around the desk, seized his caller roughly by the shoulder. "What are you telling me? Good God, Alaire! A married woman! So you—cut under Ed Austin, eh?" Momentarily Ellsworth lost control of himself; his eyes blazed and his fingers tightened painfully. "What damnable trick have you played on that girl? Tell me before I choke you."

For once Dave Law's passion failed to ignite at the heat of another's anger; he only sat limp and helpless in the judge's grasp. Finally he muttered: "I played square enough. It's one of those things that just happen. We couldn't help ourselves. She'll come to you for her divorce."

The lawyer uttered a shocking oath. "Then it's no mere romantic infatuation on her part?"

"Oh no!"

Ellsworth loosed his grip. He turned away and began to pace the office floor, shaking his head. "This is—unfortunate. Alaire, of all people—as if she didn't have enough to bear." He turned fiercely upon the cowering figure in the chair, saying: "I'll tell her the whole truth myself, before she goes any further."

"No! Oh, please! Let me, in my own way." Dave writhed and sank his face in his hands once more. After a while he said, "I'm waiting for you to tell me it's all a nightmare."

"Humph!" The judge continued his restless pacing. "I was sorry for you when you came in here, and it took all my strength to tell you; but now you don't matter at all. I was prepared to have you go ahead against my advice, but—I'll see you damned first."

"You have damned me."

When Ellsworth saw the haggard face turned to his he ceased his walk abruptly. "I'm all broken up, Dave," he confessed in a gentler tone than he had used heretofore. "But you'll thank me some day."

Law was no longer the big, strong, confident fellow who had entered the office such a short time before. He had collapsed; he seemed to have shrunk; he was pitifully appealing. Although there were many things he would have said, many questions upon his tongue, he could not voice them now, and it was with extreme difficulty that he managed to follow the judge's words at all.

After a time he rose and shook Ellsworth's hand limply, mechanically; then he shambled out of the office. Like a sick man, he stumbled down the stairs and into the street. When he entered his hotel the clerk and some of the idlers in the lobby looked at him queerly, but he did not see them.

All that night Dave walked the floor of his room or sat hunched up on the edge of his bed, staring at the wall and fighting the fears that preyed upon him.

He had faith enough in Alaire to believe that she would marry him regardless of the facts; her kiss, that one delirious moment when he had held her to his breast, had taught him much, and it was, in fact, this very certainty which made his struggle so hard. After all, why not? he asked himself a thousand times. Ellsworth's fears were surely exaggerated. Who could say that Frank Law had passed on his heritage? There was at least a chance that he had not, and it would require more than a remote possibility, more evidence than Ellsworth could summon, to dismay Alaire. Suppose it should transpire that he was somehow defective? What then? The signs of his mental failing would give ample warning. He could watch himself carefully and study his symptoms. He could lead the life of a sentinel perpetually on guard. The thing might never come—or at the worst it probably would not manifest itself until he was further along in years. That, it seemed, was the family history, and in such a case Dave was assured of half a life at least. Ellsworth was altogether too fearful. Yes, and he was too officious by far. This was something that did not concern him.

But such reasoning naturally brought little comfort. Dave's fears would not be put down. In common with most men of splendid physique, he had a vague contempt for those less perfect; disease or deformity had never failed to awaken his pity, and he had often argued that defective human beings, like unhealthy stock, should not be allowed to mate and to perpetuate their weaknesses. This eugenic conviction had helped to ease his conscience somewhat during his acquaintance with Alaire, for he had told himself that Ed Austin, by reason of his inherited vices, had sacrificed all right to love and marriage. These thoughts came home now to roost. What was Ed's evil heritage compared to his own? It was as vinegar to vitriol.

And yet shining through all Dave's distress, like a faint, flickering beacon in a storm, was that old doubt of his parentage; and to this he finally began to pin his hopes. In the day or two that followed his interview with Ellsworth, it afforded him almost the only comfort he knew; for in the end he had to face the truth; he could not marry if he were really Frank Law's son.

Those were dark hours for Dave. He discharged his duties automatically, taking no interest whatever in his work; his nights he spent in morose meditation. Unable to sleep, he tramped the hot streets in an effort to fight off his growing nervousness. He became irritable, despondent; his eyes took on the look of an invalid's; his face aged and grayed. Physically, too, he grew very tired, for no burden is heavier to bear than that of doubt and indecision.

One afternoon Ellsworth entered his office to find Dave waiting for him. The young man began in a shaky, husky voice:

"I can't stand it, Judge. I'm going to pieces, fast."

"You do look bad."

"Yes. I don't sleep. I'm so irritable I can't get along up at the court-house. I'm—licked. The worst of it is, I don't know whether it's all imagination, or whether you really stirred up that devilish sleeping thing in me. Anyhow, something has got me. All I can do is study and analyze and watch and imagine— I sit all night thinking—thinking, until everything gets queer and distorted. If I were sane before, you've about unbalanced me with your damnable suggestions."

"A few nights of sleep will make you feel better," Ellsworth said, gravely.

"I tried drugs, but they made me worse. God! Then my fancies *were* sick. No, I'm going to get out."

"Where? How?"

"I'm going north to look up the members of my family and learn who I really am. I resigned from the Ranger force to-day. That's no place for a fellow with a—homicidal mania."

"Dave! You're taking this thing too absolutely and too hard," Ellsworth declared.

But Dave went on, unheeding. "Another reason why I want to get away now is that Alaire will expect me to come to her when she sends for me and—I wouldn't dare trust myself."

"Have you told her—written her?"

"Not yet, and I sha'n't until I trace out the last doubt in my own mind."

In an effort to cheer, Ellsworth put his arm about the sufferer's shoulders. "I'm sure you'll do the right thing, Dave," he said. "Maybe, after all, your instinct is true and you're not Frank Law's boy. I hope so, for this thing weighs me down as it weighs you; but you mustn't let it whip you. Don't give in, and meanwhile, above all things, try to get some sleep."

Dave nodded and mumbled something; then he slouched out, leaving the lawyer overcome by a great pity. Ellsworth had seen men, stunned by a court sentence, turn away from the bar with that same dumb, fixed look of hopelessness in their eyes. Impulsively he cursed the sense of duty that had prompted him to interfere.

XXIII

THE CRASH

THE several days following Dave's unexpected call at Las Palmas Alaire spent in a delightful reverie. She had so often wrestled with the question of divorce that she had begun to weary of it; and now, when she tried to summon energy to consider it anew, she found herself, as usual, reasoning in a circle and arriving at no decision. She gave up trying, at length, and for the time being rested content in the knowledge that she loved and was loved. In her heart she knew well enough what her ultimate course would be: sooner or later events would force her action. Yielding to a natural cowardice, therefore, she resigned herself to dreamy meditations and left the future to take care of itself. A week passed while she hugged her thoughts to her breast, and then one evening she rode home to learn that Ed had returned from San Antonio.

But Ed was ill, and he did not appear at dinner. It had been years since either had dared invade the other's privacy, and now, inasmuch as her husband did not send for her, Alaire did not presume to offer her services as nurse. As a matter of fact, she considered this quite unnecessary, for she felt sure that he was either suffering the customary after-effects of a visit to the city or else that he lacked the moral courage to undertake an explanation of his hurried flight from the ranch. In either event she was glad he kept to his room.

Heretofore their formal relations had made life at least tolerable to Alaire, but now she experienced a feeling of guilt at finding herself under the same roof with him. Oddly enough, it seemed to her that in this she wronged Dave and not her husband; for she reasoned that, having given her love to one man, her presence in the same house with another outraged that love.

When Austin made his appearance, on the day following his return, his bleared eyes, his puffy, pasty cheeks, his shattered nerves, showed plainly enough how he had spent his time. Although he was jumpy and irritable, he seemed determined by an assumption of high spirits and exaggerated friendliness to avert criticism. Since Alaire spared him all reproaches, his efforts seemed to meet with admirable success. Now Ed's opinion of women was not high, for those with whom he habitually associated were of small intelligence; and, seeing that his wife continued to manifest a complete indifference to his past actions, he decided that his apprehensions had been groundless. If Alaire remembered the Guzman affair at all, or if she had suspected him of complicity in it, time had evidently dulled her suspicions, and he was a little sorry he had taken pains to stay away so long.

Before many days, however, he discovered that this indifference of hers was not assumed, and that in some way or other she had changed. Ed was accustomed, when he returned exhausted from a debauch, to seeing in his wife's eyes a strained misery; he had learned to expect in her bearing a sort of pitying, hopeless resignation. But this time she was not in the least depressed. On the contrary, she appeared happier, fresher, and—younger than he had seen her for a long time. It was mystifying. When, one morning, he overheard her singing in her room, he was shocked. Over this phenomenon he meditated with growing amazement and a faint stir of resentment in his breast, for he lived a self-centered life, considering himself the pivot upon which revolved all the affairs of his little world. To feel that he had lost even the power to make his wife unhappy argued that he had overestimated his importance.

At length, having sufficiently recovered his health to begin drinking again, he yielded one evening to an alcoholic impulse and, just as Alaire bade him good night, clumsily sought to force an explanation.

"See here!" he shot at her. "What's the matter with you lately?" He saw that he had startled her and that she made an effort to collect her wandering thoughts. "You're about as warm and wifely as a stone idol."

"Am I any different to what I have always been?"

"Humph! You haven't been exactly sympathetic of late. Here I come home sick, and you treat me like one of the help. Don't you think I have feelings? Jove! I'm lonesome."

Alaire regarded him speculatively, then shook her head as if in answer to some thought.

In an obvious and somewhat too mellow effort to be friendly, Ed continued: "Don't let's go on like this, Alaire. You blame me for going away so much, but, good Lord! when I'm home I feel like an interloper. You treat me like a cow-thief."

"I'm sorry. I've tried to be everything I should. I'm the interloper."

"Nonsense! If we only got along together as well as we seem to from the outside it wouldn't be bad at all. But you're too severe. You seem to think a man should be perfect. Well, none of us are, and I'm no worse than the majority. Why, I know lots of fellows who forget themselves and do things they shouldn't, but they don't mean anything by it. They have wives and homes to go to when it's all over. But have I? You're as glad to see me as if I had smallpox. Maybe we've made a mess of things, but married life isn't what young girls think it is. A wife must learn to give and take."

"I've given. What have I taken?" she asked him in a voice that quivered.

Ed made an impatient gesture. "Oh, don't be so literal! I mean that, since we're man and wife, it's up to you to be a little more—broad-gauge in your views."

"In other words, you want me to ignore your conduct. Is that it? I'm afraid we can't argue that, Ed."

Within the last few days Austin's mind had registered a number of new impressions, and at this moment he realized that his wife was undoubtedly the most attractive woman physically he had ever known. Of course she was cold, but she had not always been so. He had chilled her; he had seen the fire die year by year, but now the memory of her as she had once been swept over him, bringing a renewed appreciation of her charms. His recent dissipation had told upon him as heavily as a siege of sickness, and this evening he was in that fatuous, sentimental mood which comes with convalescence. Having no fault to find with himself, and feeling merely a selfish desire to make more pleasant his life at Las Palmas, he undertook to bend Alaire to his will.

"All right; don't let's try to argue it," he laughed, with what he considered an admirable show of magnanimity. "I hate arguments, anyhow; I'd much rather have a good-night kiss."

But when he stooped over her Alaire held him off and turned her head. "No!" she said.

"You haven't kissed me for—"

"I don't wish to kiss you."

"Don't be silly," he insisted. This suggestion of physical resistance excited his love of conquest and awoke something like the mood of a lover—such a lover as a man like Ed could be. For a moment he felt as if Alaire were some other woman than his wife, a woman who refused and yet half expected to be overcome; therefore he laughed self-consciously and repeated, "Come now, I want a kiss."

Alaire thrust him back strongly, and he saw that her face had whitened. Oddly enough, her stubbornness angered him out of all reason, and he began a harsh remonstrance. But he halted when she cried:

"Wait! I must tell you something, Ed. It's all over, and has been for a long time. We're going to end it."

"End it?"

"We can't go on living together. Why should we?"

"So? Divorce? Is that it?"

Alaire nodded.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Ed was dumfounded. "Isn't this rather sudden?" he managed to inquire.

"Oh no. You've suggested it more than once."

"I thought you didn't believe in divorces—couldn't stomach 'em? What's happened?"

"I have changed my mind."

"Humph! People don't change their minds in a minute," he cried, angrily. "Is there some other man?"

Now Ed Austin had no faintest idea that his wife would answer in the affirmative, for he had long ago learned to put implicit confidence in her, and her life had been so open that he could not imagine that it held a double interest. Therefore her reply struck him speechless.

"Yes, Ed," she said, quietly, "there is another man."

It was like her not to evade. She had never lied to him.

Ed's mouth opened; his reddened eyes protruded. "Well—" he stammered. "Well, by God!" Then after a moment: "Who is it, the Greaser or the cowboy?" He laughed loudly, disagreeably. "It must be one or the other, for you haven't seen any men except them. Another man! Well, you're cool about it."

"I am glad you know the truth."

Muttering to himself, Ed made a short excursion around the room, then paused before his wife with a sneer on his lips. "Did it ever occur to you that I might object?" he demanded.

Alaire eyed him scornfully. "What right have you to object?"

Ed could not restrain a malevolent gleam of curiosity. "Say, who is it? Ain't I entitled to know that much?" As Alaire remained silent he let his eyes rove over her with a kind of angry appreciation. "You're pretty enough to stampede any man," he admitted. "Yes, and you've got money, too. I'll bet it's the Ranger. So, you've been having your fling while I was away. Hunh! We're tarred with the same stick."

"You don't really believe that," she told him, sharply.

"Why not? You've had enough opportunity. I don't see anything of you, and haven't for years. Well, I was a fool to trust you."

Alaire's eyes were very dark and very bright as she said: "I wonder how I have managed to live with you as long as I have. I knew you were weak, nasty—so I was prepared for something like this. But I never thought you were a downright criminal until—"

"Criminal? Rot!"

"How about that Guzman affair? You can't go much lower, Ed, and you can't keep me here with you."

"I can't keep you, eh?" he growled. "Well, perhaps not. I suppose you've got enough on me to secure a divorce, but I can air some of your dirty linen. Oh, don't look like that! I mean it! Didn't you spend a night with David Law?" He leered at her unpleasantly, then followed a step as she drew back.

"Don't you touch me!" she cried.

A flush was deepening Ed's purple cheeks; his voice was peculiarly brutal and throaty as he said: "The decree isn't entered yet, and so long as you are Mrs. Austin I have rights. Yes, and I intend to exercise them. You've made me jealous, and, by God—" He made to encircle her with his arms and was half successful, but when Alaire felt the heat of his breath in her face a sick loathing sprang up within her, and, setting her back against the wall, she sent him reeling. Whether she struck him or merely pushed him away she never knew, for during the instant of their struggle she was blind with indignation and fury. Profiting by her advantage, she dodged past him, fled to her room, and locked herself in.

She heard him muttering profanely; heard him approach her chamber more than once, then retire uncertainly, but she knew him too well to be afraid.

Later that night she wrote two letters—one to Judge Ellsworth, the other to Dave Law.

José Sanchez rode to the Morales house feeling some concern over the summons that took him thither. He wondered what could have induced General Longorio to forsake his many important duties in order to make the long trip from Nuevo Pueblo; surely it could be due to no lack of zeal on his, José's, part. No! The horsebreaker flattered himself that he had made a very good spy indeed; that he had been Longorio's eyes and ears so far as circumstances permitted. Nor did he feel that he had been lax in making his reports, for through Rosa he had written the general several lengthy letters, and just for good measure these two had conjured up sundry imaginary happenings to prove beyond doubt that *Señora* Austin was miserably unhappy with her husband and ready to welcome such a dashing lover as Longorio. Therefore José could not for the life of him imagine wherein he had been remiss. Nevertheless, he was uneasy, and he hoped that nothing had occurred to anger his general.

But Longorio, when he arrived at the meeting-place, was not in a bad humor. Having sent Rosa away on some errand, he turned to José with a flashing smile, and said:

"Well, my good friend, the time has come."

Now José had no faintest idea what the general was talking about, but to be called the good friend of so illustrious a person was flattering. He nodded decisively.

"Yes, beyond doubt," he agreed.

"Mexico is in a bad way. These rebels are growing by the thousands; they overrun the country like ants. You read the papers, eh?"

"Sometimes; when there are enough pictures," said José.

"Ha! Then I doubt if you know what is happening. Well, I'll have to tell you. Our enemies have taken all northern Mexico except that part which is under my control; but they are pushing toward me from two sides, and I prepare to retreat. That is not the worst, however; the *Gringos* are hoping to profit by Mexico's distress; they are making ready to invade our Fatherland, and every Mexican must fight or become a slave."

This was indeed news! José began patriotically cursing the whole American people.

"Understand, I make you my confidant because I think a great deal of you, José." The general laid an affectionate hand upon José's shoulder. "The first time I saw you I said: 'There's a boy after my own heart. I shall learn to love that José, and I shall put him in the way of his fortune.' Well, I have not changed my mind, and the time is come. You are going to help me and I am going to help you."

José Sanchez thrilled with elation from head to foot. This promised to be the greatest day of his life, and he felt that he must be dreaming.

"You haven't tired of Rosa, eh? You still wish to marry her?" Longorio was inquiring.

"Yes. But, of course, I'm a poor man."

"Just so. I shall attend to that. Now we come to the object of my visit. José, I propose to make you rich enough in one day so that you can marry."

"But first, wait!" exclaimed the horse-breaker. "I bring you something of value, too." Desiring to render favor for favor, and to show that he was fully deserving of the general's generosity, José removed from inside the sweat-band of his hat a sealed, stamped letter, which he handed to his employer. "Yesterday I carried the mail to town, but as I rode away from Las Palmas the *señora* handed me this, with a silver dollar for myself. Look! It is written to the man we both hate."

Longorio took the letter, read the inscription, and then opened the envelope. José looked on with pleasure while he spelled out the contents.

When the general had finished reading, he exclaimed: "Ho! A miracle! Now I know all that I wish to know."

"Then I did well to steal that letter, eh?"

"*Diablo!* Yes! That brute of a husband makes my angel's life unbearable, and she flees to La Feria to be rid of him. Good! It fits in with my plans. She will be surprised to see me there. Then, when the war comes and all is chaos—then what? I'll warrant I can make her forget certain things and certain people." Longorio nodded with satisfaction. "You did very well, José."

The latter leaned forward, his eyes bright. "That lady is rich. A fine prize, truly. She would bring a huge ransom."

This remark brought a smile to Longorio's face. "My dear friend, you do not in the least understand," he said. "Ransom! What an idea!" He lost himself in meditation, then, rousing, spoke briskly: "Listen! In two, three days, your *señora* will leave Las Palmas. When she is gone you will perform your work, like the brave man I know you to be. You will relieve her of her husband."

José hesitated, and the smile vanished from his face.

"*Señor* Ed is not a bad man. He likes me; he—" Longorio's gaze altered and José fell silent.

"Come! You are not losing heart, eh? Have I not promised to make you a rich man? Well, the time has arrived." Seeing that José still manifested no eagerness, the general went on in a different tone: "Do not think that you can withdraw from our little arrangement. Oh no! Do you remember a promise I made to you when you came to me in Romero? I said that if you played me false I would bury you to the neck in an ant-hill and fill your mouth with honey. I keep my promises."

José's struggle was brief; he promptly resigned himself to the inevitable. With every evidence of sincerity he assured Longorio of his loyalty, and denied the least intention of betraying his general's confidence. What, after all, was his mission upon earth if not to serve Longorio's interests? One might have a peaceful heart and still be a man. José was every inch a man; he was a very devil when he let himself go, and his Excellency need have no fears as to the outcome of their plan. After all, the *Gringos* were enemies, and there was no one of them who did not merit destruction.

Pleased with these sentiments, and feeling sufficiently assured that José was now really in the proper frame of mind to suit his purpose, Longorio took the winding trail back toward Sangre de Cristo.

XXIV

DAVE LAW COMES HOME

A FEW days after she had written to Judge Ellsworth Alaire followed her letter in person, for, having at last decided to divorce Ed, she acted with characteristic decision. Since Ellsworth had more than once advised this very course, she went to Brownsville anticipating his willing support. She was greatly amazed, therefore, to find that he had completely changed his views and to hear him argue strongly against her determination. Hurt and puzzled at first by this strange lack of sympathy, Alaire soon began to grow angry, and when the judge persisted in his arguments she quarreled with him for the first time in their acquaintance. But it was not until she had threatened to secure another attorney that he reluctantly gave in, even then making it plain that in meeting her wishes he was acting against his best judgment.

Now Alaire had desired Ellsworth's advice, also, as to her own immediate plans, since it was of course impossible for her longer to share Ed's roof. She had written Dave Law, telling him that she intended to go to La Feria, there to remain pending the hearing of her suit; but later she had come to doubt the wisdom of such a course, inasmuch as the war talk grew louder with every day. However, her attorney's inexplicable change of front and his stubborn opposition to her wishes prevented her from confiding in him any more than was necessary, and she returned to Las Palmas determined to use her own best judgment. To be sure, she would have preferred some place of refuge other than La Feria, but she reasoned that there she would at least be undisturbed, and that Ed, even if he wished to effect a reconciliation, would not dare to follow her, since he was *persona non grata* in Federal Mexico. Nor were her doubts of Ellsworth's loyalty entirely allayed. All in all, therefore, it seemed to her that the Mexican ranch offered her the safest asylum.

She had counted upon seeing Dave during her stay in Brownsville, and her failure to do so was a grave disappointment. The news of his resignation from the Force had at first perplexed her; then she had thrilled at the thought that his action must have something to do with her; that doubtless he, too, was busied in making plans for their new life. She told herself that it was brave of him to obey her injunctions so literally and to leave her unembarrassed by his presence at this particular time. It inspired her to be equally brave and to wait patiently for the day when she could welcome him with clean hands and a soul unashamed.

In the midst of Alaire's uncertainty of mind it gratified her to realize that Dave alone would know of her whereabouts. She wondered if he would come to see her. He was a reckless, headstrong lover, and his desires were all too likely to overcome his deliberate resolves. She rather hoped that in spite of his promise he would venture to cross the border so that she could see and be near him, if only for a day or for an hour. The possibility frightened and yet pleased her. The conventional woman within her frowned, but her outlaw heart beat fast at the thought.

Alaire did not explain her plans even to Dolores, but when her preparations were complete she took the Mexican woman with her, and during Ed's absence slipped away from the ranch. Boarding the train at Jonesville, she was in Pueblo that night.

If Alaire's clash with Ellsworth had been trying to her, it had been no less painful to the lawyer himself. Feeling himself bound by his promise to Dave, he had not dared to tell her the truth; consequently he had been hard put to it to dissuade her from taking immediate action. When she would not listen, he found himself in the most unpleasant position of his life; for although he could not but sympathize with her desire to be free from Ed Austin, it distressed him beyond measure to see her riding blindly to a fall. More than once after their strained parting he was tempted to go to Las Palmas and set himself right in her eyes; but he managed to hold to his determination and to school himself to await Dave's return.

Before long, however, Ellsworth found other worries engaging him, for it seemed at last that war with Mexico was imminent. After months of uncertainty the question had come to issue, and that lowering cloud which had hung above the horizon took ominous shape and size. Ellsworth awoke one morning to learn that an ultimatum had gone forth to President Potosi; that the Atlantic fleet had been ordered south; and that marines were being rushed aboard transports pending a general army mobilization. It looked as if the United States had finally risen in wrath, and as if nothing less than a miracle could now avert the long-expected conflict.

Naturally Brownsville, like other border towns, was plunged into a panic, and Ellsworth, as a leading citizen of his community, had his hands full.

In the midst of this excitement, and while suspense was at its highest, Dave Law returned. Ellsworth found him in his office one morning and fell upon the young man eagerly. Two weeks had worked a shocking change in Dave; he was gaunt, ill; his eyes were bright and tired and feverish. They had a new expression, too, which the judge at first could not fathom, but which he took to be fear. Dave's brown cheeks had bleached; his hands hung loose and unmanageable at his sides.

"I've had a long trip," he said, somberly, "months—years long, it seems to me."

"Well, thank God you're back. Tell me, what did you find out?"

Law closed his eyes wearily. He shook his head. "Nothing except verification. I'm sorry I went. The Law blood is tainted, all right—it reeks. The whole damned outfit were crazy. On my mother's side, though, I'm healthy enough—and there appears to be some mystery or something queer about me as a baby. That's all I've discovered so far. But I've a relative in San Antone, a cousin of my mother's, who runs a curio-store. He deals in Mexican jewelry and antiques, and all that—strange old fellow. He says he has a trunkful of stuff that belonged to his family, and he has promised to go through it for me."

"Then you still hope to prove—"

"I haven't any hope. I've given up."

"Why?" Ellsworth asked, sharply.

"Because I know the truth. Because I'm—going crazy. Fact! I can see it myself now."

"Why, boy, that's imagination, nothing else."

"Perhaps," Dave agreed, listlessly. "I'm reading everything on the subject of insanity that I can get hold of."

Ellsworth tried to laugh. "That in itself is enough to unbalance you."

"I'm moody, depressed; I'm getting so I imagine things. By and by I'll begin to think I'm persecuted—I believe that's how it works. Already I have hallucinations in broad daylight, and I'm afraid of the dark. Fancy! I don't sleep very often, and when I do I wake up in a puddle of sweat, shivering. And dreams! God, what dreams! I know they're dreams, now, but sooner or later I suppose I'll begin to believe in 'em." Dave sighed and settled lower in his chair. "I—I'm mighty tired."

Ellsworth clapped him on the back. "Come, now! A perfectly healthy man could wreck his reason this way. You must stop it. You must do something to occupy your mind."

"Sure. That's what brings me home. I'm going to the front."

"To the war?"

"Yes. They're recruiting a rough-rider regiment in San Antone. I joined yesterday, and I've come to get my horse."

After a time Ellsworth said, "Alaire has commenced her action." Dave took a deep, sharp breath and began to tremble weakly. "I didn't tell her, but—you must. We can't go on like this."

"Suppose I just go to war and—and don't come back?" thickly inquired the sufferer.

"That won't do. You won't get killed—fellows like you never do. Wouldn't you rather have her know the truth than believe you to be a quitter?" Ellsworth waited a minute. "Do you want me to tell her for you, Dave?"

Law shook his head slowly, wearily. "No, I'll do it. I'm game. I'd rather she heard it from me."

Blaze Jones took the San Antonio paper out upon the porch and composed himself in the hammock to read the latest war news. Invasion! Troops! The Stars and Stripes! Those were words that stirred Jones deeply and caused him to neglect his work. Now that his country had fully awakened to the necessity of a war with Mexico—a necessity he had long felt—he was fired with the loftiest patriotism and a youthful eagerness to enlist. Blaze realized that he was old and fat and near-sighted;

but what of that? He could fight. Fighting, in fact, had been one of his earliest accomplishments, and he prided himself upon knowing as much about it as any one man could learn. He believed in fighting both as a principle and as an exercise; in fact, he attributed his good health to his various neighborly "unpleasantnesses," and he had more than once argued that no great fighter ever died of a sluggish liver or of any one of the other ills that beset sedentary, peace-loving people. Nations were like men—too much ease made them flabby. And Blaze had his own ideas of strategy, too. So during the perusal of his paper he bemoaned the mistakes his government was making. Why waste time with ultimatums? he argued to himself. He had never done so. Experience had taught him that the way to win a battle was to beat the other fellow to the draw; hence this diplomatic procrastination filled him with impatience. It seemed almost treasonable to one of Blaze's intense patriotism.

He was engaged in laying out a plan of campaign for the United States when he became conscious of voices behind him, and realized that for some time Paloma had been entertaining a caller in the front room. Their conversation had not disturbed him at first, but now an occasional word or sentence forced its meaning through his preoccupation, and he found himself listening.

Paloma's visitor was a woman, and as Blaze harkened to her voice, he felt his heart sink. It was Mrs. Strange. She was here again. With difficulty Blaze conquered an impulse to flee, for she was recounting a story all too familiar to him.

"Why, it seemed as if the whole city of Galveston was there, and yet nobody offered to help us," the dressmaker was saying. "Phil was a perfect hero, for the ruffian was twice his size. Oh, it was an awful fight! I hate to think of it."

"What made him pinch you?" Paloma inquired.

"Heaven only knows. Some men are dreadful that way. Why, he left a black-and-blue mark!"

Blaze broke into a cold sweat and cursed feebly under his breath.

"He wasn't drunk, either. He was just naturally depraved. You could see it in his face."

"How *did* you escape?"

"Well, I'll tell you. We chased him up across the boulevard and in among the tents, and then—" Mrs. Strange lowered her voice until only a murmur reached the listening man. A moment, then both women burst into shrill, excited laughter, and Blaze himself blushed furiously.

This was unbearable! It was bad enough to have that woman in Jonesville, a constant menace to his good name, but to allow her access to his own home was unthinkable. Sooner or later they were bound to meet, and then Paloma would learn the disgraceful truth—yes, and the whole neighborhood would likewise know his shame. In fancy, Blaze saw his reputation torn to shreds and himself exposed to the gibes of the people who venerated him. He would become a scandal among men, an offense to respectable women; children would shun him. Blaze could not bear to think of the consequences, for he was very fond of the women and children of Jonesville, especially the women. He rose from his hammock and tiptoed down the porch into the kitchen, from which point of security he called loudly for his daughter.

Alarmed at his tone, Paloma came running. "What is the matter?" she asked, quickly.

"Get her out!" Blaze cried, savagely. "Get shed of her."

"Her? Who?"

"That varmint."

"Father, what ails you?"

"Nothin' ails me, but I don't want that caterpillar crawlin' around my premises. I don't like her."

Paloma regarded her parent curiously. "How do you know you don't like her when you've never seen her?"

"Oh, I've seen her, all I want to; and I heard her talkin' to you just now. I won't stand for nobody tellin' you—bad stories."

Paloma snickered. "The idea! She doesn't—"

"Get her out, and keep her out," Blaze rumbled. "She ain't right; she ain't—human. Why, what d'you reckon I saw her do, the other day? Makes me shiver now. You remember that big bull-snake that lives under the barn, the one I've been layin' for? Well, you won't believe me, but him and her are friends. Fact! I saw her pick him up and play with him. *Who*—EE! The goose-flesh popped out on me till it busted the buttons off my vest. She ain't my kind of people, Paloma. 'Strange' ain't no name for her; no, sir! That woman's dam' near peculiar."

Paloma remained unmoved. "I thought you knew. She used to be a snake-charmer."

"A—*what?*" There was no doubt about it. Blaze's hair lifted. He blinked through his big spectacles; he pawed the air feebly with his hands. "How can you let her touch you? I couldn't. I'll bet she carries a pocketful of dried toads and—and keeps live lizards in her hair. I knew an old voodoo woman that ate cockroaches. Get shed of her, Paloma, and we'll fumigate the house."

At that moment Mrs. Strange herself opened the kitchen door to inquire, "Is anything wrong?" Misreading Blaze's expression for one of pain, she exclaimed: "Mercy! Now, what have you done to yourself?"

But the object of her solicitude backed away, making peculiar clucking sounds deep in his throat. Paloma was saying:

"This is my father, Mrs. Strange. You and he have never happened to meet before."

"Why, yes we have! I know you," the seamstress exclaimed. Then a puzzled light flickered in her black eyes. "Seems to me we've met somewhere, but—I've met so many people." She extended her hand, and Blaze took it as if expecting to find it cold and scaly. He muttered something unintelligible. "I've been dying to see you," she told him, "and thank you for giving me Paloma's work. I love you both for it."

Blaze was immensely relieved that this dreaded crisis had come and gone; but wishing to make assurance doubly sure, he contorted his features into a smile the like of which his daughter had never seen, and in a disguised voice inquired, "Now where do you reckon you ever saw me?"

The seamstress shook her head. "I don't know, but I'll place you before long. Anyhow, I'm glad you aren't hurt. From the way you called Paloma I thought you were. I'm handy around sick people, so I—"

"Listen!" Paloma interrupted. "There's some one at the front door." She left the room; Blaze was edging after her when he heard her utter a stifled scream and call his name.

Now Paloma was not the kind of girl to scream without cause, and her cry brought Blaze to the front of the house at a run. But what he saw there reassured him momentarily; nothing was in sight more alarming than one of the depot hacks, in the rear seat of which was huddled the figure of a man. Paloma was flying down the walk toward the gate, and Phil Strange was waiting on the porch. As Blaze flung himself into view the latter explained:

"I brought him straight here, Mr. Jones, 'cause I knew you was his best friend."

"Who? Who is it?"

"Dave Law. He must have come in on the noon train. Anyhow, I found him—like that." The two men hurried toward the road, side by side.

"What's wrong with him?" Blaze demanded.

"I don't know. He's queer—he's off his bean. I've had a hard time with him."

Paloma was in the carriage at Dave's side now, and calling his name; but Law, it seemed, was scarcely conscious. He had slumped together; his face was vacant, his eyes dull. He was muttering to himself a queer, delirious jumble of words.

"Oh, Dad! He's sick—sick," Paloma sobbed. "Dave, don't you know us? You're home, Dave. Everything is—all right now."

"Why, you'd hardly recognize the boy!" Blaze exclaimed; then he added his appeal to his daughter's. But they could not arouse the sick man from his coma.

"He asked me to take him to Las Palmas," Strange explained. "Looks to me like a sunstroke. You'd ought to hear him rave when he gets started."

Paloma turned an agonized face to her father. "Get a doctor, quick," she implored; "he frightens me."

But Mrs. Strange had followed, and now she spoke up in a matter-of-fact tone: "Doctor nothing," she said. "I know more than all the doctors. Paloma, you go into the house and get a bed ready for him, and you men lug him in. Come, now, on the run, all of you! I'll show you what to do." She took instant charge of the situation, and when Dave refused to leave the carriage and began to fight off his friends, gabbling wildly, it was she who quieted him. Elbowing Blaze and her husband out of the way, she loosed the young man's frenzied clutch from the carriage and, holding his hands in hers, talked to him in such a way that he gradually relaxed. It was she who helped him out and then supported him into the house. It was she who got him up-stairs and into bed, and it was she who finally stilled his babble.

"The poor man is burning up with a fever," she told the others, "and fevers are my long suit. Get me some towels and a lot of ice."

Blaze, who had watched the snake-charmer's deft ministrations with mingled amazement and suspicion, inquired: "What are you going to do with ice? Ice ain't medicine."

"I'm going to pack his head in it."

"God'l'mighty!" Blaze was horrified. "Do you want to freeze his brain?"

Mrs. Strange turned on him angrily. "You get out of my way and mind your own business. 'Freeze his brain!'" With a sniff of indignation she pushed past the interloper.

But Blaze was waiting for her when she returned a few moments later with bowls and bottles and various remedies which she had commandeered. He summoned sufficient courage to block her way and inquire:

"What you got there, now, ma'am?"

Mrs. Strange glared at him balefully. With an effort at patience she inquired: "Say! What ails you, anyhow?"

Jones swallowed hard. "Understand, he's a friend of mine. No damned magic goes."

"Magic?"

"No—cockroaches or snakes' tongues, or—"

Mrs. Strange fingered a heavy china bowl as if tempted to bounce it from Blaze's head. Then, not deigning to argue, she whisked past him and into the sick-room. It was evident from her expression that she considered the master of the house a harmless but offensive old busybody.

For some time longer Blaze hung about the sick-room; then, his presence being completely ignored, he risked further antagonism by telephoning for Jonesville's leading doctor. Not finding the physician at home, he sneaked out to the barn and, taking Paloma's car, drove away in search of him. It was fully two hours later when he returned to discover that Dave was sleeping quietly.

XXV

A WARNING AND A SURPRISE

DAVE LAW slept for twenty hours, and even when he awoke it was not to a clear appreciation of his surroundings. At first he was relieved to find that the splitting pain in his head was gone, but imagined himself to be still in the maddening local train from Brownsville. By and by he recognized Paloma and Mrs. Strange, and tried to talk to them, but the connection between brain and tongue was imperfect, and he made a bad business of conversation. It seemed queer that he should be in bed at the Joneses', and almost ludicrous for Mrs. Strange to support him while Paloma fed him. In the effort to understand these mysteries, he dozed again. After interminable periods of semi-consciousness alternating with complete oblivion, he roused himself to discover that it was morning and that he felt better than for weeks. When he had recovered from his surprise he turned his head and saw Mrs. Strange slumbering in a chair beside his bed; from her uncomfortable position and evident fatigue he judged that she must have kept a long and faithful vigil over him.

A little later Paloma, pale and heavy-eyed, stole into the room, and Dave's cheerful greeting awoke Mrs. Strange with a jerk.

"So! You're feeling better, aren't you," the latter woman cried, heartily.

"Yes. How did I get here?" Dave asked. "I must have been right sick and troublesome to you."

Paloma smiled and nodded. "Sick! Why, Dave, you frightened us nearly to death! You were clear out of your head."

So that was it. The breakdown had come sooner than he expected, and it had come, moreover, without warning. That was bad—bad! Although Dave's mind was perfectly clear at this moment, he reasoned with a sinking heart that another brain-storm might overtake him at any time. He had imagined that the thing would give a hint of its coming, but evidently it did not.

Mrs. Strange broke into his frowning meditation to ask, "How long since you had a night's sleep?"

"I— Oh, it must be weeks."

"Umph! I thought so. You puzzled that pill-roller, but doctors don't know anything, anyhow. Why, he wanted to wake you up to find out what ailed you! I threatened to scald him if he did."

"I seem to remember talking a good deal," Dave ventured. "I reckon I—said a lot of foolish things." He caught the look that passed between his nurses and its significance distressed him.

Mrs. Strange continued: "That's how we guessed what your trouble was, and that's why I wouldn't let that fool doctor disturb you. Now that you've had a sleep and are all right again, I'm going home and change my clothes. I haven't had them off for two nights."

"Two nights!" Dave stared in bewilderment. Then he lamely apologized for the trouble he had caused, and tried to thank the women for their kindness.

He was shaky when, an hour later, he came downstairs for breakfast; but otherwise he felt better than for many days; and Blaze's open delight at seeing him did him as much good as the food he ate.

Dave spent the morning sunning himself on the porch, reading the papers with their exciting news, and speculating over the significance of his mental collapse. The more he thought of it now the more ominous it seemed. One result which particularly distressed him was the change it had wrought in Paloma Jones's bearing; for of a sudden the girl had become distant and formal. The reason was not far to seek; Dave could not doubt that the knowledge of his secret had frightened her. Well, that was to be expected—he would probably lose all his friends in time. It was a bitter thought; life would be very dull and flat without friends. He wondered how he could bear to see those who loved him turn away; to see their liking change to restraint and fear, as it threatened to do in Paloma's case. Better anything than that.

There was, however, one friend who, Dave knew, would not shun him; one of whose lasting affection he felt sure; and at memory of her he came to his feet. Montrosa would trust him. She had given him her heart, and her loyalty would never waver. With a clutch at his throat, and a little pain in his breast, he stumbled down the steps and went in search of her.

Now during Dave's absence Paloma had done her best to spoil the mare, and among other marks of favor had allowed her free run of the yard, where the shade was cool and the grass fine, and where delicious tidbits were to be had from the kitchen for the mere asking. In consequence, Dave did not go far until he was discovered. Montrosa signaled, then trotted toward him with ears and tail lifted. Her delight was open and extravagant; her welcome was as enthusiastic as a horse could make it. Gone were her coquetry and her airs; she nosed and nibbled Dave; she rubbed and rooted him with the violence of a battering-ram, and permitted him to hug her and murmur words of love into her velvet ears. She swapped confidence for confidence, too; and then, when he finally walked back toward the house, she followed closely, as if fearful that he might again desert her.

Phil Strange met the lovers as they turned the corner of the porch, and warmly shook Dave's hand. "Teeny—my wife—told me you was better," he began, "so I beat it out here. I hung around all day yesterday, waiting to see you, but you was batty."

"I was pretty sick," Dave acknowledged. "Mrs. Strange was mighty kind to me."

"Sick people get her goat. She's got a way with 'em, and with animals, too. Why, Rajah, the big python with our show, took sick one year, and he'd have died sure only for her. Same with a lot of the other animals. She knows more'n any vet I ever saw."

"Perhaps I needed a veterinary instead of a doctor," Dave smiled. "I guess I've got some horse blood in me. See!" Montrosa had thrust her head under his arm and was waiting for him to scratch her ears.

"Well, I brought you some mail." Strange fumbled in his pocket for a small bundle of letters, explaining: "Blaze gave me these for you as I passed the post-office. Now I wonder if you feel good enough to talk business."

Dave took the letters with a word of thanks, and thrust them carelessly into his pocket. "What seems to be the trouble?" he inquired.

"You remember our last talk? Well, them Mexicans have got me rattled. I've been trying everywhere to locate you. If you hadn't come home I'd have gone to the prosecuting attorney, or somebody."

"Then you've learned something more?"

Phil nodded, and his sallow face puckered with apprehension. "Rosa Morales has been to see me regular."

Dave passed an uncertain hand over his forehead. "I'm not in very good shape to tackle a new proposition, but—what is it?"

"We've got to get Mrs. Austin away from here."

"We? Why?"

"If we don't they'll steal her."

"*Steal her?*" Dave's amazement was patent. "Are you crazy?"

"Sometimes I think I am, but I've pumped that Morales girl dry, and I can't figure anything else out of what she tells me. Her and José expect to make a lump of quick money, jump to Mexico, get married, and live happy ever after. Take it from me, it's Mrs. Austin they aim to cash in on."

"Why—the idea's ridiculous!"

"Maybe it is and maybe it ain't," the fortune-teller persisted. "More than one rich Mexican has been grabbed and held for ransom along this river; yes, and Americans, too, if you can believe the stories. Anything goes in that country over there."

"You think José is planning to kidnap her? Nonsense! One man couldn't do such a thing."

"I didn't say he could," Phil defended himself, sulkily. "Remember, I told you there was somebody back of him."

"Yes, I remember, but you didn't know exactly who."

"Well, I don't exactly know yet. I thought maybe you might tell me."

There was a brief silence, during which Dave stood frowning. Then he appeared to shake himself free from Phil's suggestions.

"It's too utterly preposterous. Mrs. Austin has no enemies; she's a person of importance. If by any chance she disappeared—"

"She's done that very little thing," Strange declared.

"What?"

"She's disappeared—anyhow, she's gone. Yesterday, when I saw you was laid up and couldn't help me, I 'phoned her ranch; somebody answered in Spanish, and from what I could make out they don't know where she is."

Dave wondered if he had understood Strange aright, or if this could be another trick of his own disordered brain. Choosing his words carefully, he said: "Do you mean to tell me that she's missing and they haven't given an alarm? I reckon you didn't understand the message, did you?"

Strange shrugged. "Maybe I didn't. Suppose you try. You *sabe* the lingo."

Dave agreed, although reluctantly, for at this moment he wished nothing less than to undertake a mental effort, and he feared, in spite of Strange's statement, that he might hear Alaire's voice over the wire. That would be too much; he felt as if he could not summon the strength to control himself in such a case. Nevertheless, he went to the telephone, leaving Phil to wait.

When he emerged from the house a few moments later, it was with a queer, set look upon his face.

"I got 'em," he said. "She's gone—left three days ago."

"Where did she go?"

"They wouldn't tell me."

"They *wouldn't?*" Strange looked up sharply.

"Wouldn't or couldn't." The men eyed each other silently; then Phil inquired:

"Well, what do you make of it?"

"I don't know. She wasn't kidnapped, that's a cinch, for Dolores went with her. I—think we're exciting ourselves unduly."

The little fortune-teller broke out excitedly: "The hell we are! Why do you suppose I've been playing that Morales girl? I tell you there's something crooked going on. Don't I know? Didn't I wise you three weeks ago that something like this was coming off?" It was plain that Phil put complete faith in his powers of divination, and at this moment his earnestness carried a certain degree of conviction. Dave made an effort to clear his tired brain.

"Very well," he said. "If you're so sure, I'll go to Las Palmas. I'll find out all about it, and where she went. If anybody has dared to—" He drew a deep breath and his listlessness vanished; his eyes gleamed with a hint of their customary fire. "I reckon I've got one punch left in me." He turned and strode to his room.

As Dave changed into his service clothes he was surprised to feel a new vigor in his limbs and a new strength of purpose in his mind. His brain was clearer than it had been for a long time. The last cobweb was gone, and for the moment at least he was lifted out of himself as by a strong, invigorating drink. When he stood in his old boots and felt the familiar drag of his cartridge-belt, when he tested his free muscles, he realized that he was another man. Even yet he could not put much faith in Phil Strange's words—nevertheless, there might be a danger threatening Alaire; and if so, it was time to act.

Phil watched his friend saddle the bay mare, then as Dave tied his Winchester scabbard to its thongs he laughed nervously.

"You're loaded for bear."

The horseman answered, grimly: "I'm loaded for José Sanchez. If I lay hands on him I'll learn what he knows."

"You can't get nothing out of a Mexican."

"No? I've made Filipinos talk. Believe me, I can be some persuasive when I try." With that he swung a leg over Montrosa's back and rode away.

Law found it good to feel a horse between his knees. He had not realized until now how long Montrosa's saddle had been empty. The sun was hot and friendly, the breeze was sweet in his nostrils as he swept past the smiling fields and out into the mesquite country. Heat waves danced above the patches of bare ground; insects sang noisily from every side; far ahead the road ran a wavering course through a deceitful mirage of rippling ponds. It was all familiar, pleasant; it was home; black moods were impossible amid such surroundings. The chemistry of air and earth and sunshine were at work dissolving away the poisons of his imagination. Of course Dave's trouble did not wholly vanish; it still lurked in the back of his mind and rode with him; but from some magic source he was deriving a power to combat it. With every mile he covered his strength and courage increased.

Such changes had come into his life since his last visit to Las Palmas that it gave him a feeling of unreality to discover no alteration in the ranch. He had somehow felt that the buildings would look older, that the trees would have grown taller, and so when he finally came in sight of his destination he reined in to look.

Behind him he heard the hum of an approaching motor, and he turned to behold a car racing along the road he had just traveled. The machine was running fast, as a long streamer of choking dust gave evidence, and Dave soon recognized it as belonging to Jonesville's prosecuting attorney. As it tore past him its owner shouted something, but the words were lost. In the automobile with the driver were several passengers, and one of these likewise called to Dave and seemed to motion him to follow. When the machine slowed down a half-mile ahead and veered abruptly into the Las Palmas gateway, Dave lifted Montrosa to a run, wondering what pressing necessity could have induced the prosecuting attorney to risk such a reckless burst of speed.

Dave told himself that he was unduly apprehensive; that Strange's warnings had worked upon his nerves. Nevertheless, he continued to ride so hard that almost before the dust had settled he, too, turned into the shade of the palms.

Yes, there was excitement here; something was evidently very much amiss, judging from the groups of ranch-hands assembled upon the porch. They were clustered about the doors and windows, peering in.

Briefly they turned their faces toward Law; then they crowded closer, and he perceived that they were not talking. Some of them had removed their hats and held them in their hands.

Dave's knees shook under him as he dismounted; for one sick, giddy instant the scene swam before his eyes; then he ran toward the house and up the steps. He tried to frame a question, but his lips were stiff with fright. Heedless of those in his path, he forced his way into the house, then down the hall toward an open door, through which he saw a room full of people. From somewhere came the shrill wailing of a woman; the house was full of hushed voices and whisperings. Dave had but one thought. From the depths of his being a voice called Alaire's name until his brain rang with it.

A bed was in the room, and around it was gathered a group of white-faced people. With rough hands Law cleared a way for himself, and then stopped, frozen in his tracks. His arms relaxed, his fingers unclenched, a great sigh whistled slowly from his lungs. Before him, booted, spurred, and fully dressed, lay the dead body of Ed Austin.

Dave was still staring at the master of Las Palmas when the prosecuting attorney spoke to him.

"God! This is terrible, isn't it?" he said. "He must have died instantly."

"Who—did it?"

"We don't know yet. Benito found him and brought him in. He hasn't been dead an hour."

Law ran his eyes over the room, and then asked, sharply, "Where is Mrs. Austin?"

He was answered by Benito Gonzales, who had edged closer. "She's not here, *señor*."

"Have you notified her?"

Benito shrugged. "There has been no time, it all happened so quickly—"

Some one interrupted, and Dave saw that it was the local sheriff—evidently it was he who had waved from the speeding machine a few moments before.

"I'm glad you're here, Dave, for you can give me a hand. I'm going to round up these Mexicans right away and find out what they know. Whoever did it hasn't gone far; so you act as my deputy and see what you can learn."

When Dave had regained better control of himself he took Benito outdoors and demanded full details of the tragedy. With many lamentations and incoherencies, the range boss told what he knew.

Ed had met his death within a half-mile of Las Palmas as he rode home for dinner. Benito, himself on his way to the house, had found the body, still warm, near the edge of the pecan-grove. He had retained enough sense to telephone at once to Jonesville, and then—Benito hardly knew what he had done since then, he was so badly shaken by the tragedy.

"What time did it happen?"

"It was noon when I came in."

Dave consulted his watch, and was surprised to discover that it was now only a few minutes past one. It was evident, therefore, that Benito had indeed lost no time, and that his alarm had met with instant response.

"Now tell me, who did it?"

Benito flung his hands high. "God knows! Some enemy, of course; but Don Eduardo had many."

"Not that sort of enemies. There was nobody who could wish to kill him."

"That is as it is."

"Haven't you any suspicions?"

"No, *señor*."

"You say Mrs. Austin is gone?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

Dave spoke brusquely: "Come, Benito; you must know, for your wife went with her. Are you trying to keep something back?"

"No, no! As God is my judge!" Benito declared. "I didn't know they were going until the very last, and even then Dolores would tell me nothing. We were having bad times here at Las Palmas; there were stormy scenes yonder in the house. *Señor* Ed was drinking again, you understand? The *señora* had reason to go."

"You think she ran away to escape him?"

"Exactly."

Dave breathed more easily, for this seemed to settle Strange's theory. The next instant, however, his apprehensions were doubled, for Benito added:

"No doubt she went to La Feria."

Law uttered an incredulous exclamation. "Not *there!* Surely she wouldn't go to La Feria at such a time. Why, that country is ablaze. Americans are fleeing from Mexico."

"I hadn't thought of that," Benito confessed. "But if she didn't go there, where did she go? Saints above! It is a fine condition of affairs when a wife keeps secrets from her husband, eh? I suppose Dolores feared I would tell Don Eduardo, God rest his soul! This much I do know, however: not long ago there came a letter from General Longorio, offering settlement for those cattle he stole in his government's name. Dolores told me the *señora* was highly pleased and was going to Mexico for her money. It was a mark of Longorio's favor, you understand me? He's a great—friend, an ardent admirer." Benito winked. "Dolores told me all about that, too. No, I think they went to La Feria."

Dave remembered his first conversation with Phil Strange and the fortune-teller's insistence that some powerful person was behind José Sanchez. More than three weeks ago Strange had forecast something very like this murder of Ed Austin. Dave felt as if he were the victim of an hysterical imagination. Nevertheless, he forced himself to ask, quietly:

"Is José Sanchez anywhere about?"

The range boss shrugged. "I sent him to the east pasture this morning."

"Did he go?"

"Eh? So! You suspect José of this. God in heaven! José is a wild boy— But wait! I'll ask Juan if he saw him; yes, and Victoria, too. That is Victoria you hear squalling in the kitchen. Wait here."

Benito hurried away, leaving Dave a prey to perplexity; but he was back again in a few moments. His face was grave.

"José did not go to the east pasture," he said.

"Where is he now?"

"No one seems to know."

Law walked to his horse, mounted, and galloped away. Benito, who watched him, saw that he turned toward the river road which led to the Las Palmas pumping-plant.

The more Dave thought about Ed Austin's death, the more certain he became that it was in some way connected with Alaire's disappearance; and the loose end by which the tangle might be unraveled, it seemed to him, lay in the hands of Rosa Morales, José's sweetheart. That Sanchez was the murderer Dave now had little doubt; but since the chance of apprehending him was small, he turned his attention to the girl. He would make Rosa speak, he told himself, if he had to use force—this was no time for gentle methods. If she knew aught of Alaire's whereabouts or the mystery of her departure from Las Palmas, he would find a way to wring the truth from her. Dave's face, a trifle too somber at all times, took on a grimmer aspect now; he felt a slow fury kindling in his breast.

Years of experience had taught him to be always alert, even during his moments of deepest preoccupation, and so, from force of habit, when he came to the pump-house road he carefully scanned it. In the dust were fresh hoof-prints leading toward the river. Now he knew this road to be seldom used, and therefore he wondered who could be riding it at a gallop in this blistering midday heat. A few rods farther on and his quick eye detected something else—something that brought him from his saddle. Out of the rut he picked a cigarette butt, the fire of which was cold but the paper of which was still wet from the smoker's lips. He examined it carefully; then he remounted and rode on, pondering its significance.

Dave loped out of the thicket and straight across the clearing to the Morales house. Leaving Montrosa's reins hanging, he opened the door and entered without knocking. Rosa appeared in the opening to another room, her eyes wide with fright at this apparition, and Dave saw that she was dressed in her finest, as if for a holiday or for a journey.

"Where's your father?" he demanded.

"He's gone to Sangre de Cristo. What do you want?"

"When did he go?"

"This morning, early. He—"

"Who's been here since he left?"

Rosa was recovering from her first surprise, and now her black brows drew together in anger. "No one has come. You are the first. And have you no manners to stride into a respectable house—?"

Dave broke in harshly: "Rosa, you're lying. José Sanchez has been here within an hour. Where is he?" When the girl only grew whiter and raised a hand to her breast, he stepped toward her, crying, "Answer me!"

Rosa recoiled, and the breath caught in her throat like a sob. "I'll tell you nothing," she said in a thin voice. Then she began to tremble. "Why do you want José?"

"You know why. He killed Don Eduardo, and then he rode here. Come! I know everything."

"Lies! Lies!" Rosa's voice grew shrill. "Out of this house! I know you. It was you who betrayed Panfilo, and his blood is on your hands, assassin!" With the last word she made as if to retreat, but Dave was too quick; he seized her, and for an instant they struggled breathlessly.

Dave had reasoned beforehand that his only chance of discovering anything from this girl lay in utterly terrorizing her and in profiting by her first panic; therefore he pressed his advantage. He succeeded better than he had dared to hope.

"You know who killed *Señor* Ed," he cried, fiercely. "The fortune-teller read your plans, and there is no use to deny it."

Rosa screamed again; she writhed; she tried to sink her teeth into her captor's flesh. In her body was the strength of a full-grown man, and Dave could hardly hold her. But suddenly, as the two scuffled, from the back room of the house came a sound which caused Dave to release the girl as abruptly as he had seized her—it was the clink and tinkle of Mexican spurs upon a wooden floor.

XXVI

THE WATER-CURE

WITHOUT an instant's hesitation Dave flung himself past Rosa and through the inner door.

José Sanchez met him with a shout; the shock of their collision overbore the lighter man, and the two went down together, arms and legs intertwined. The horse-breaker fired his revolver blindly—a deafening explosion inside those four walls—but he was powerless against his antagonist's strength and ferocity. It required but a moment for Law to master him, to wrench the weapon from his grasp, and then, with the aid of José's silk neck-scarf, to bind his wrists tightly.

From the front of the little house came the crash of a door violently slammed as Rosa profited by the diversion to save herself.

When finally José stood, panting and snarling, his back to the wall, Dave regarded him with a sinister contraction of the lips that was almost a grin.

"Well," he said, drawing a deep breath, "I see you didn't go to the east pasture this morning."

"What do you want of me?" José managed to gasp.

There was a somewhat prolonged silence, during which Dave continued to stare at his prisoner with that same disquieting expression. "Why did you kill Don Eduardo?" he asked.

"I? Bah! Who says I killed him?" José glared defiance. "Why are you looking at me? Come! Take me to jail, if you think that will do any good."

"It's lucky I rode to Las Palmas this morning. In another hour you would have been across the Rio Grande—with Rosa and all her fine clothes, eh? Now you will be hanged. Well, that is how fortune goes."

The horse-breaker tossed his head and shrugged with a brave assumption of indifference; he laughed shortly. "You can prove nothing."

"Yes," continued Dave, "and Rosa will go to prison, too. Now—suppose I should let you go? Would you help me? In ten minutes you could be safe." He inclined his head toward the muddy, silent river outside. "Would you be willing to help me?"

José's brows lifted. "What's this you are saying?" he inquired, eagerly.

"I would only ask you a few questions."

"What questions?"

"Where is *Señora* Austin?"

José's face became blank. "I don't know."

"Oh yes, you do. She started for La Feria. But—did she get there? Or did Longorio have other plans for her? You'd better tell me the truth, for your general can't help you now." Dave did his best to read the Mexican's expression, but failed. "*Señor* Ed's death means nothing to me," he went on, "but I must know where his wife is, and I'm willing to pay, with your liberty." In spite of himself his anxiety was plain.

José exclaimed: "Ho! I understand. He was in your way and you're glad to be rid of him. Well, we have no business fighting with each other."

"Will you tell me—?"

"I'll tell you nothing, for I know nothing."

"Come! I must know."

José laughed insolently.

Law's face became black with sudden fury. His teeth bared themselves. He took a step forward, crying:

"By God! You *will* tell me!" Seizing his prisoner by the throat, he pinned him to the wall; then with his free hand he cocked Longorio's revolver and thrust its muzzle against José's body. "Tell me!" he repeated. His countenance was so distorted, his expression so maniacal, that José felt his hour had come. The latter, being in all ways Mexican, did not struggle; instead, he squared his shoulders and, staring fearlessly into the face above him, cried:

"Shoot!"

For a moment the two men remained so; then Dave seemed to regain control of himself and the murder light flickered out of his eyes. He flung his prisoner aside and cast the revolver into a corner of the room.

José picked himself up, cursing his captor eloquently. "You *Gringos* don't know how to die," he said. "Death? Pah! We must die some time. And supposing I do know something about the *señora*, do you think you can force me to speak? Torture wouldn't open my lips."

Law did not trust himself to reply; and the horse-breaker went on with growing defiance:

"I am innocent of any crime; therefore I am brave. But you— The blood of innocent men means nothing to you—Panfilo's murder proves that—so complete your work. Make an end of me."

"Be still!" Dave commanded, thickly.

But the fellow's hatred was out of bounds now, and by the bitterness of his vituperation he seemed to invite death. Dave interrupted his vitriolic curses to ask harshly:

"Will you tell me, or will you force me to wring the truth out of you?"

José answered by spitting at his captor; then he gritted an unspeakable epithet from between his teeth.

Dave addressed him with an air of finality. "You killed that man and your life is forfeit, so it doesn't make much difference whether I take it or whether the State takes it. You are brave enough to die—most of you Mexicans are—but the State can't force you to speak, and I can." José sneered. "Oh yes, I can! I intend to know all that you know, and it will be better for you to tell me voluntarily. I must learn where *Señora* Austin is, and I must learn quickly, if I have to kill you by inches to get the truth."

"So! Torture, eh? Good. I can believe it of you. Well, a slow fire will not make me speak."

"No. A fire would be too easy, José."

"Eh?"

Without answer Dave strode out of the room. He was back before his prisoner could do more than wrench at his bonds, and with him he brought his lariat and his canteen.

"What are you going to do?" José inquired, backing away until he was once more at bay.

"I'm going to give you a drink."

"Whisky? You think you can make me drunk?" The horse-breaker laughed loudly but uneasily.

"Not whisky; water. I'm going to give you a drink of water."

"What capers!"

"When you've drunk enough you'll tell me why you killed your employer and where General Longorio has taken his wife. Yes, and everything else I want to know." Seizing the amazed Mexican, Dave flung him upon Morales's hard board bed, and in spite of the fellow's struggles deftly made him fast. When he had finished—and it was no easy job—José lay "spread-eagled" upon his back, his wrists and ankles firmly bound to the head and foot posts, his body secured by a tight loop over his waist. The rope cut painfully and brought a curse from the prisoner when he strained at it. Law surveyed him with a face of stone.

"I don't want to do this," he declared, "but I know your kind. I give you one more chance. Will you tell me?"

José drew his lips back in a snarl of rage and pain, and Dave realized that further words were useless. He felt a certain pity for his victim and no little admiration for his courage, but such feelings were of small consequence as against his agonizing fears for Alaire's safety. Had he in the least doubted José's guilty knowledge of Longorio's intentions, Dave would have hesitated before employing the barbarous measures he had in mind, but—there was nothing else for it. He pulled the canteen cork and jammed the mouthpiece firmly to José's lips. Closing the fellow's nostrils with his free hand, he forced him to drink.

José clenched his teeth, he tried to roll his head, he held his breath until his face grew purple and his eyes bulged. He strained like a man upon the rack. The bed creaked to his muscular contortions; the rope tightened. It was terribly cruel, this crushing of a strong will bent on resistance to the uttermost; but never was an executioner more pitiless, never did a prisoner's agony receive less consideration. The warm water spilled over José's face, it drenched his neck and chest; his joints cracked as he strove for freedom and tried to twist his head out of Law's iron grasp. The seconds dragged, until finally Nature asserted herself. The imprisoned breath burst forth; there sounded a loud gurgling cry and a choking inhalation. José's body writhed with the convulsions of drowning as the water and air were sucked into his lungs. Law was kneeling over his victim now, his weight and strength so applied that José had no liberty of action and could only drink, coughing and fighting for air. Somehow he managed to revive himself briefly and again shut his teeth; but a moment more and he was again retched with the furious battle for air, more desperate now than before. After a while Law freed his victim's nostrils and allowed him a partial breath, then once more crushed the mouthpiece against his lips. By and by, to relieve his torture, José began to drink in great noisy gulps, striving to empty the vessel.

But the stomach's capacity is limited. In time José felt himself bursting; the liquid began to regurgitate. This was not mere pain that he suffered, but the ultimate nightmare horror of a death more awful than anything he had ever imagined. José would have met a bullet, a knife, a lash, without flinching; flames would not have served to weaken his resolve; but this slow drowning was infinitely worse than the worst he had thought possible; he was suffocating by long, black, agonizing minutes. Every nerve and muscle of his body, every cell in his bursting lungs, fought against the outrage in a purely physical frenzy over which his will power had no control. Nor would insensibility come to his relief—Law watched him too carefully for that. He could not even voice his sufferings by shrieks; he could only writhe and retch and gurgle while the ropes bit into his flesh and his captor knelt upon him like a monstrous stone weight.

But José had made a better fight than he knew. The canteen ran dry at last, and Law was forced to release his hold.

"Will you speak?" he demanded.

Thinking that he had come safely through the ordeal, José shook his head; he rolled his bulging, bloodshot eyes and vomited, then managed to call God to witness his innocence.

Dave went into the next room and refilled the canteen. When he reappeared with the dripping vessel in his hand, José tried to scream. But his throat was torn and strained; the sound of his own voice frightened him.

Once more the torment began. The tortured man was weaker now, and in consequence he resisted more feebly; but not until he was less than half conscious did Law spare him time to recover.

José lay sick, frightened, inert. Dave watched him without pity. The fellow's wrists were black and swollen, his lips were bleeding; he was stretched like a dumb animal upon the vivisectionist's table, and no surgeon with lance and scalpel could have shown less emotion than did his inquisitor. Having no intention of defeating his own ends, Dave allowed his victim ample time in which to regain his ability to suffer.

Alaire Austin had been right when she said that Dave might be ruthless; and yet the man was by no means incapable of compassion. At the present moment, however, he considered himself simply as the instrument by which Alaire was to be saved. His own feelings had nothing to do with the matter; neither had the sufferings of this Mexican. Therefore he steeled himself to prolong the agony until the murderer's stubborn spirit was worn down. Once again he put his question, and, again receiving defiance, jammed the canteen between José's teeth.

But human nature is weak. For the first time in his life José Sanchez felt terror—a terror too awful to be endured—and he made the sign.

He was no longer the insolent defier, the challenger, but an imploring wretch, whose last powers of resistance had been completely shattered. His frightened eyes were glued to that devilish vessel in which his manhood had dissolved, the fear of it made a woman of him.

Slowly, in sighs and whimpers, in agonies of reluctance, his story came; his words were rendered almost incomprehensible by his abysmal fright. When he had purged himself of his secret Dave promptly unbound him; then leaving him more than half dead, he went to the telephone which connected the pumping-station with Las Palmas and called up the ranch.

He was surprised when Blaze Jones answered. Blaze, it seemed, had just arrived, summoned by news of the tragedy. The countryside had been alarmed and a search for Ed Austin's slayer was being organized.

"Call it off," Dave told him. "I've got your man." Blaze stuttered his surprise and incredulity. "I mean it. It's José Sanchez, and he has confessed. I want you to come here, quick; and come alone, if you don't mind. I need your help."

Inside of ten minutes Jones piloted his automobile into the clearing beside the river, and, leaving his motor running, leaped from the car.

Dave met him at the door of the Morales house and briefly told him the story of José's capture.

"Say! That's quick work," the rancher cried, admiringly. "Why, Ed ain't cold yet! You gave him the 'water-cure,' eh? Now I reckoned it would take more than water to make a Mexican talk."

"José was hired for the work; he laid for Ed Austin in the pecan-grove and shot him as he passed."

"Hired! Why this *hombre* needs quick hangin', don't he? I told 'em at Las Palmas that you'd rounded up the guilty party, so I reckon they'll be here in a few minutes. We'll just stretch this horse-wrangler, and save the county some expense." Law shrugged. "Do what you like with him, but—it isn't necessary. He'll confess in regulation form, I'm sure. I had to work fast to learn what became of Mrs. Austin."

"Miz Austin? What's happened to her?"

Dave's voice changed; there was a sudden quickening of his words. "They've got her, Blaze. They waited until they had her safe before they killed Ed."

"'They?' Who the hell are you talkin' about?"

"I mean Longorio and his outfit. He's got her over yonder." Dave flung out a trembling hand toward the river. Seeing that his hearer failed to comprehend, he explained, swiftly: "He's crazy about her—got one of those Mexican infatuations—and you know what that means. He couldn't steal her from Las Palmas—she wouldn't have anything to do with him—so he used that old cattle deal as an excuse to get her across the border. Then he put Ed out of the way. She went of her own accord, and she didn't tell Austin, because they were having trouble. She's gone to La Feria, Blaze."

"La Feria! Then she's in for it."

Dave nodded his agreement; for the first time Blaze noted how white and set was his friend's face.

"Longorio must have foreseen what was coming," Dave went on. "That country's aflame; Americans aren't safe over there. If war is declared, a good many of them will never be heard from. He knows that. He's got her safe. She can't get out."

Blaze was very grave when next he spoke. "Dave, this is bad—bad. I can't understand what made her go. Why, she must have been out of her head. But we've got to do something. We've got to burn the wires to Washington—yes, and to Mexico City. We must get the government to send soldiers after her. God! What have we got 'em for, anyhow?"

"Washington won't do anything. What can be done when there are thousands of American women in the same danger? What steps can the government take, with the fleet on its way to Vera Cruz, with the army mobilizing, and with diplomatic relations suspended? Those Greasers are filling their jails with our people—rounding 'em up for the day of the big break—and the State Department knows it. No, Longorio saw it all coming—he's no fool. He's got her; she's in there—trapped."

Blaze took the speaker by the shoulder and faced him about. "Look here," said he, "I'm beginnin' to get wise to you. I believe you're—the man in the case." When Dave nodded, he vented his amazement in a long whistle. After a moment he asked, "Well, why did you want me to come here alone, ahead of the others?"

"Because I want you to know the whole inside of this thing so that you can get busy when I'm gone; because I want to borrow what money you have—"

"What you aimin' to pull off?" Blaze inquired, suspiciously.

"I'm going to find her and bring her out."

"You? Why, Dave, you can't get through. This is a job for the soldiers."

But Dave hardly seemed to hear him. "You must start things moving at once," he said, urgently. "Spread the news, get the story into the papers, notify the authorities. Get every influence at work, from here to headquarters; get your Senator and the Governor of the state at work. Ellsworth will help you. And now give me your last dollar."

Blaze emptied his pockets, shaking his shaggy head the while. "La Feria is a hundred and fifty miles in," he remonstrated.

"By rail from Pueblo, yes. But it's barely a hundred, straight from here."

"You 'ain't got a chance, single-handed. You're crazy to try it."

The effect of these words was startling, for Dave laughed harshly. "'Crazy' is the word," he agreed. "It's a job for a lunatic, and that's me. Yes, I've got bad blood in me, Blaze—bad blood—and I'm taking it back where I got it. But listen!" He turned a sick, colorless face to his friend. "They'll whittle a cross for Longorio if I do get through." He called to Montrosa, and the mare came to him, holding her head to one side so as not to tread upon her dragging reins.

"I'm 'most tempted to go with you," Blaze stammered, uncertainly.

"No. Somebody has to stay here and stir things up. If we had twenty men like you we might cut our way in and out, but there's no time to organize, and, anyhow, the government would probably stop us. I've got a hunch that I'll make it. If I don't—why, it's all right."

The two men shook hands lingeringly, awkwardly; then Blaze managed to wish his friend luck. "If you don't come back," he said, with a peculiar catch in his voice, "I reckon there's enough good Texans left to follow your trail. I'll sure look forward to it."

Dave took the river-bank to Sangre de Cristo, where, by means of the dilapidated ferry, he gained the Mexican side. Once across, he rode straight up toward the village of Romero. When challenged by an under-sized soldier he merely spurred Montrosa forward, eying the sentry so grimly that the man did no more than finger his rifle uncertainly, cursing under his breath the overbearing airs of all *Gringos*. Nor did the rider trouble to make the slightest détour, but cantered the full length of Romero's dusty street, the target of more than one pair of hostile eyes. To those who saw him, soldiers and civilians alike, it was evident that this stranger had business, and no one felt called upon to question its nature. There are men who carry an air more potent than a body-guard, and Dave Law was one of these. Before the village had thoroughly awakened to his coming he was gone, without a glance to the right or left, without a word to any one.

When Romero was at his back he rode for a mile or two through a region of tiny scattered farms and neglected garden-patches, after which he came out into the mesquite. For all the signs he saw, he might then have been in the heart of a foreign country. Mexico had swallowed him.

As the afternoon heat subsided, Montrosa let herself out into a freer gait and began to cover the distance rapidly, heading due west through a land of cactus and dagger, of thorn and barb and bramble.

The roads were unfenced, the meadows desolate; the huts were frequently untenanted. Ahead the sky burned splendidly, and the sunset grew more brilliant, more dazzling, until it glorified the whole mean, thirsty, cruel countryside.

Dave's eyes were set upon that riot of blazing colors, but for the time it failed to thrill him. In that welter of changing hues and tints he saw only red. Red! That was the color of blood; it stood for passion, lust, violence; and it was a fitting badge of color for this land of revolutions and alarms. At first he saw little else—except the hint of black despair to follow. But there was gold in the sunset, too—the yellow gold of ransom! That was Mexico—red and yellow, blood and gold, lust and license. Once the rider's fancy began to work in this fashion, it would not rest, and as the sunset grew in splendor he found in it richer meanings. Red was the color of a woman's lips—yes, and a woman's hair. The deepening blue of the high sky overhead was the hue of a certain woman's eyes. A warm, soft breeze out of the west beat into his face, and he remembered how warm and soft Alaire's breath had been upon his cheek.

The woman of his desires was yonder, where those colors warred, and she was mantled in red and gold and purple for his coming. The thought aroused him; the sense of his unworthiness vanished, the blight fell from him; he felt only a throbbing eagerness to see her and to take her in his arms once more before the end.

With his head high and his face agleam, he rode into the west, into the heart of the sunset.

XXVII

LA FERIA

"WHAT'S this I hear about war?" Dolores inquired of her mistress, a few days after their arrival at La Feria. "They tell me that Mexico is invaded and that the American soldiers have already killed more than a thousand women and children."

"Who tells you this?" Alaire asked.

"The men—everybody," Dolores waved a hand in the direction of the other ranch buildings. "Our people are buzzing like bees with the news, and, of course, no one cares to work when the Americans are coming."

"I shall have to put an end to such talk."

"This morning the word came that the revolution is ended and that the soldiers of both parties are uniting to fight for their liberties. They say the *Gringos* are killing all the old people—every one, in fact, except the girls, whom they take with them. Already they have begun the most horrible practices. Why, at Espinal"—Dolores's eyes were round—"would you believe it?—those Yankee soldiers ate a baby! They roasted the little dear like a *cabrito* and ate it! I tell you, it makes wild talk among the *peladors*."

"Do you believe such stories?" Alaire inquired, with some amusement.

"Um-m—not altogether. But, all the same, I think it is time we were going home."

"This is home, for me, Dolores."

"Yes, but now that war—"

"There isn't any war, and there won't be any. However, if you are nervous I'll send you back to Las Palmas at once."

"Glory of God! It would be the end of me. These Mexicans would recognize me instantly as an American, for I have the appearance and the culture. You can imagine what would happen to me. They would tear me from the train. It was nothing except General Longorio's soldiers that brought us safely through from Nuevo Pueblo."

"Then I'm glad that he insisted upon sending them with us. Now tell the ranch-hands to put no faith in these ridiculous stories. If they wish the truth let them ask General Longorio; he will be here to-day and quiet their fears."

"You think he intends to pay us for our cattle?"

"Yes."

Dolores pondered a moment. "Well, perhaps he does—it is not his money. For that matter, he would give all Mexico if you asked it. Tse! His love consumes him like a fever."

Alaire stirred uneasily; then she rose and went to an open window, which looked out into the tiny *patio* with its trickling fountain and its rank, untended plants. "Why do you insist that he loves me?" she asked. "All Mexicans are gallant and pay absurd compliments. It's just a way they have. He has never spoken a word that could give offense." As Dolores said nothing, she went on, hesitatingly, "I can't very well refuse to see him, for I don't possess even a receipt to show that he took those cattle."

"Oh, you must not offend him," Dolores agreed, hastily, "or we'd never leave Mexico alive." With which cheering announcement the housekeeper heaved a deep sigh and went about her duties with a gloomy face.

Longorio arrived that afternoon, and Alaire received him in the great naked living-room of the *hacienda*, with her best attempt at formality. But her coolness served not in the least to chill his fervor.

"*Señora*," he cried, eagerly, "I have a thousand things to tell you, things of the greatest importance. They have been upon my tongue for hours, but now that I behold you I grow drunk with delight and my lips frame nothing but words of admiration for your beauty. So! I feast my eyes." He retained his warm clasp of her fingers, seeming to envelop her uncomfortably with his ardor.

"What is it you have to tell me?" she asked him, withdrawing her hand.

"Well, I hardly know where to begin—events have moved so swiftly, and such incredible things have happened. Even now I am in a daze, for history is being made every hour—history for Mexico, for you, and for me. I bring you good news and bad news; something to startle you and set your brain in a whirl. I planned to send a messenger ahead of me, and then I said: 'No, this is a crisis; therefore no tongue but mine shall apprise her, no hand but mine shall comfort her. Only a coward shrinks from the unpleasant; I shall lighten her distress and awaken in her breast new hope, new happiness'—"

"What do you mean?" Alaire inquired, sharply. "You say you bring bad news?"

The general nodded. "In a way, terrible, shocking! And yet I look beyond the immediate and see in it a blessing. So must you. To me it spells the promise of my unspoken longings, my whispered prayers." Noting his hearer's growing bewilderment, he laid a hand familiarly upon her arm. "No matter how I tell you, it will be a blow, for death is always sudden; it always finds us unprepared."

"Death? Who—is dead?"

"Restrain yourself. Allow for my clumsiness."

"Who? Please tell me?"

"Some one very close to you and very dear to you at one time. My knowledge of your long unhappiness alone gives me courage to speak."

Alaire raised her fluttering fingers to her throat; her eyes were wide as she said: "You don't mean—Mr. Austin?"

"Yes." Longorio scrutinized her closely, as if to measure the effect of his disclosure. "*Señora*, you are free!"

Alaire uttered a breathless exclamation; then, feeling his gaze burning into her, turned away, but not before he had noted her sudden pallor, the blanching of her lips.

This unexpected announcement dazed her; it scattered her thoughts and robbed her of words, but just what her dominant emotion was at the moment she could not tell. Once her first giddiness had passed, however, once the truth had borne in upon her, she found that she felt no keen anguish, and certainly no impulse to weep. Rather she experienced a vague horror, such as the death of an acquaintance or of a familiar relative might evoke. Ed had been anything but a true husband, and her feeling now was more for the memory of the man he had been, for the boy she had known and loved, than for the man whose name she bore.

So he was gone and, as Longorio said, she was free. It meant much. She realized dimly that in this one moment her whole life had changed. She had never thought of this way out of her embarrassments; she had been prepared, in fact, for anything except this. Dead! It was deplorable, for Ed was young. Once the first shock had passed away, she became conscious of a deep pity for the man, and a complete forgiveness for the misery he had caused her. After a time she faced the news-bearer, and in a strained voice inquired:

"How did it happen? Was it—because of me?"

"No, no! Rest your mind on that score. See! I understand your concern and I share your intimate thoughts. No, it was an accident, ordained by God. His end was the result of his own folly, a gunshot wound while he was drunk, I believe. Now you will understand why I said that I bore tidings both good and evil and why I, of all people, should be the one to impart them."

Alaire turned questioning eyes upon him, as if to fathom his meaning, and he answered her with his brilliant smile Failing to evoke a response, he went on:

"Ever since I heard of it I have repeated over and over again, 'It is a miracle; it is the will of God.' Come, then, we know each other so well that we may speak frankly. Let us be honest and pretend to no counterfeit emotions. Let us recognize in this only your deliverance and the certainty of that blessed happiness which Divine Providence offers us both."

"Both?" she repeated, dully.

"Need I be plainer? You know my heart. You have read me. You understand how I have throttled my longings and remained mute while all my being called to you."

Alaire withdrew a step, and her cheeks colored with anger. "General!" she exclaimed, with some difficulty, "I am amazed. This is no time—" Her indignation rose with the sound of her own voice, causing her to stammer.

Taking advantage of her loss of words, he hurried on: "You must pardon my impetuosity, but I am a man of tremendous force, and my life moves swiftly. I am not shackled by conventions—they are less than nothing to me. If it seems to you that my eagerness carries me away, remember that war is upon us and that affairs of moment press me so that I am compelled to move like the lightning. With me, *señora*, a day is a year. The past is gone, the present is here, the future rushes forward to meet us."

"Indeed, you forget yourself," she said, warmly. Then, changing her tone: "I too must act quickly. I must go back at once."

"Oh, but I have told you only a part of what I came to say."

"Surely the rest can wait." Her voice was vibrant with contempt. "I'm in no condition to listen to anything else."

But Longorio insisted. "Wait! It is impossible for you to leave here."

Alaire stared at him incredulously.

"It is true. Mexico is a seething caldron of hate; the country is convulsed. It would be unsafe for you."

"Do you mean to say that war has been declared?"

"Practically."

"What—? You are telling me the truth?" A moment, then Alaire continued, more calmly, "If that is so, there is all the more reason why I should lose no time."

"Listen!" The general was deeply in earnest. "You have no conception of the chaos out there." He waved a comprehensive gesture. "If the explosion has not come, it will come within a few hours. That is why I flew to your side. Battle-ships are hurrying toward our coast, troops are massing against our border, and Mexico has risen like one man. The people are in a frenzy; they are out of bounds; there is sack and pillage in the cities. Americans are objects of violence everywhere and the *peons* are frantic." He paused impressively. "We face the greatest upheaval of history."

"Then why are you here?" Alaire demanded. "This is no place for you at such a moment."

Longorio came closer to her, and his voice trembled as he said: "Angel of my soul, my place is at your side." Again she recoiled, but with a fervor he had never dared display he rushed on heedlessly. "I have told you I harken only to my heart; that for one smile from you

I would behead myself; that for your favor I would betray my fatherland; that for your kiss I would face damnation. Well, I am here at your side. The deluge comes, but you shall be unharmed." He would not permit her to check him, crying: "Wait! You must hear me through, *señora*, so that you may comprehend fully why I am forced to speak at this time. Out of this coming struggle I shall emerge a heroic figure. Now that Mexico unites, she will triumph, and of all her victorious sons the name of Luis Longorio will be sung the loudest, for upon him more than upon any other depends the Republic's salvation. I do not boast. I merely state facts, for I have made all my plans, and to-morrow I put them into effect. That is why I cannot wait to speak. The struggle will be long, but you shall be my guiding star in the hour of darkness."

Under other circumstances the man's magnificent egotism might have provoked a smile. And yet, for all its grandiloquence, there was something in his speech that rang hard and true. Unquestionably Longorio was dangerous—a real personality, and no mere swaggering pretender. Alaire felt a certain reluctant respect for him, and at the same time a touch of chilling fear such as she had hardly experienced before. She faced him silently for a moment; then she said:

"Am I to understand that you forbid me to leave my own house?"

"For the time being, exactly."

"What? Then I am your prisoner!"

"No, no!" He made a gesture of denial. "How ridiculous! I merely keep you from certain destruction. You cannot go by train, because the railroad has suspended public service, nor can you ride or drive. I tell you, *señora*, the people are aroused. For the moment you must accept my protection, whether you wish to or not. To-morrow"—Longorio smiled warmly, meaningly—

"perhaps you will not be in such haste to refuse it, or to leave La Feria. Wait until you understand me better. Then— But enough of this. You are unstrung, you wish to be alone with your thoughts, and what I have to say can wait for a few hours. In the mean time, may I beg the hospitality of your ranch for myself and my men?"

Alaire acquiesced mechanically. Longorio saluted her fingers in his customary manner, and then, with a look eloquent of things unsaid, he went out to see to the comfort of his command.

Alaire sank into the nearest chair, her nerves quivering, her mind in a turmoil. This Mexican was detestable, and he was far from being the mere maker of audaciously gallant speeches, the poetically fervent wooer of every pretty woman, she had blindly supposed him. His was no sham ardor; the man was hotly, horribly in earnest. There had been a glint of madness in his eyes. And he actually seemed to think that she shared his infatuation. It was intolerable. Yet Longorio, she was sure, had an abundance of discretion; he would not dare to offer her violence. He had pride, too; and in his way he was something of a gentleman. So far, she had avoided giving him offense. But if once she made plain to him how utterly loathsome to her was his pursuit, she was sure that he would cease to annoy her. Alaire was self-confident, strong-willed; she took courage.

Her thoughts turned from her fears to the amazing reality of her widowhood. Even yet she could not wholly credit the fact that Ed's wasted life had come to an end and that she was free to make the most of her own. Alaire remembered her husband now with more tenderness, more charity, than she would have believed possible, and it seemed to her pitiful that one so blessed with opportunity should have worked such havoc with himself and with those near to him.

Doubtless it was all a part of some providential scheme, too blind for her to solve. Perhaps, indeed, her own trials had been designed to the end that her greater, truer love, when it did come, would find her ripe, responsive, ready. As for this Mexican general, she would put him in his place.

Alaire was still walking the floor of her chamber when Dolores entered, at dusk, to say that supper was ready and that General Longorio was waiting.

"Ask him to excuse me," she told her servant.

But Longorio himself spoke from the next room, saying: "*Señora*, I beg of you to honor me. I have much of importance to say, and time presses. Control your grief and give me the pleasure of your company."

After an instant's consideration Alaire yielded. It was best to have the matter over with, once for all.

XXVIII

THE DOORS OF PARADISE

ALAIRE began the mockery of playing hostess with extreme distaste, and as the meal progressed she experienced a growing uneasiness. Longorio's bearing had changed since his arrival. He was still extravagantly courteous, beautifully attentive; he maintained a flow of conversation that relieved her of any effort, and yet he displayed a repressed excitement that was disturbing. In his eyes there was a gloating look of possession hard to endure. Despite her icy formality, he appeared to be holding himself within the bounds of propriety only by an effort of will, and she was not surprised when, at the conclusion of the meal, he cast restraint aside.

She did not let him go far with his wooing before warning him: "I won't listen to you. You are a man of taste; you must realize how offensive this is."

"Let us not deceive each other," he insisted. "We are alone. Let us be honest. Do not ask me to put faith in your grief. I find my excuse in the extraordinary nature of this situation."

"Nothing can excuse indelicacy," she answered, evenly. "You transgress the commonest rules of decency."

But he was impatient. "What sentiment! You did not love your husband. You were for years his prisoner. Through the bars of your prison I saw and loved you. *Dios!* The first sight of your face altered the current of my life. I saw heaven in your eyes, and I have dreamed of nothing else ever since. Well, Providence opened the doors and set you free; God gave heed to my prayers and delivered you to me. Now you pretend to grieve at your deliverance; you ask me to respect the memory of your jailer! Decency? Delicacy? What are they except artificialities, which vanish in times of stress? Alexander the Great, Cæsar, Napoleon, Porfirio Diaz—they were strong, purposeful men; they lived as I live. *Señora,* you dally with love."

Alaire's face was white with anger as she replied: "You cause me to forget that you are my guest. Are you the man I considered you or the man you are reported to be?"

"Eh?"

"Are you the gentleman, the friend, you pretended to be, or—the vandal whom no woman can trust? You treat me as if you were my jailer. What do you mean? What kind of man are you to take advantage of my bereavement?"

After a moment's consideration Longorio began haltingly: "I don't know what kind of man I am, for you have changed me so. There was a time—I—I have done things— I have scorned all restraint, all laws except those of my desires, and so, perhaps, I am a vandal. Make sure of this, however—I shall not injure you. Christ is no more sacred to me than you, my heart's treasure. You accuse me of indelicacy because I lack the strength to smother my admiration. I adore you; my being dissolves, my veins are afire with longing for you; I am mad with the knowledge that you are mine. Mad? *Caramba!* I am insane; my mind totters; I grope my way like a man blinded by a dazzling light; I suffer agonies. But see! I refuse to touch you. I am a giant in my restraint. The strength of heroes is mine, and I strangle my impulses as they are born, although the effort kills me. *Señora,* I await the moment of your voluntary surrender. I wait for you." He extended his arms, and Alaire saw that his olive features were distorted with emotion; that his hands, his whole thin, high-strung body were shaking uncontrollably.

She could summon no coherent words.

"You believed I was a hawk and would seize you, eh?" he queried. "Is that why you continue to shrink? Well, let me tell you something, if my tongue will frame the thoughts in my mind. My passion is so deep and so sacred that I would not be content with less than all of you. Your lips would not satisfy mine unless they were hot with love, your kisses wet with desire. I must have you all, and so I wait, trembling. I say this so badly that I doubt if you understand. Listen, then: to possess you by force would be—well, as if I sacked a cathedral of its golden images and expected to gain heaven by clutching the Madonna in my arms. *Señora*, in you I see the priceless jewel of my life, which I shall wear to dazzle the world, and without which I shall destroy myself. Now let me tell you what I can offer you, what setting I can build for this treasure. Marriage with Luis Longorio—"

Alaire could not control a start.

As if quickened by his intensity, the man read her thought. "You did not imagine that I offered you anything less?"

"What was I to think? Your reputation—"

"Mother of God!" breathed the general. So! That is what you meant a moment ago. That is why you refuse my embraces. No, no! Other women have feared me and I have laughed in their hair as they tore at my arms, but you—you will be my wife, and all Mexico shall bow at your feet." He checked her denial with a gesture. "Wait until I tell you the vision I have seen during these days of my despair. I see Mexico made whole by my hands; a land of peace and plenty; a people with one name upon their lips—the name of Longorio the Deliverer; and you as the first lady of them all. You know me for a man of tremendous ability in every line. Well, I know myself, too. I have measured myself carefully, and I have no weakness. There is no other like me. Pancho Gomez? Bah! He is a red-handed bandit of no culture. Candeleria, his chief? The idol of the ignorant and a dreamer of no force. Potosi? He is President to-day, but what of to-morrow? Those who surround him are weaklings, and he stumbles toward oblivion. Who will succeed him? Who will issue from the coming struggle as the dominant figure of Mexico? Who but that military genius who checks the Yankee hordes and saves the fatherland? I am he. Fate points the path of glory and I am her man of destiny. You see, then, what I bring you—power, position, riches. Riches? *Caramba!* Wait until my hands are in the treasury. I will load you with gold and jewels, and I will make you the richest woman in the world. *Señora*, I offer you dominion. I offer you the President's palace and Chapultepec. And with all that I offer you such passionate love as no woman of history ever possessed.

He paused, spent by the force of his own intensity; it was plain that he expected an immediate surrender.

Alaire's lips parted in the faintest of mocking smiles. "You have great confidence in yourself," she said.

"Yes. I know myself as no one knows me."

"Why do you think I care for you?"

Longorio's eyes opened. His expression plainly showed that he could not imagine any woman in her senses failing to adore him.

"Don't you take much for granted?" Alaire insisted.

The Mexican shook his head. Then his face lightened. "Ah! Now I see. Your modesty forbids you to acknowledge your love—is that it? Well, I know that you admire me, for I can see it. All women admire me, and they all end by loving me." His chest arched imperceptibly; with a slender finger he delicately smoothed his black eyebrows. Alaire felt a wild impulse to laugh, but was glad she had subdued it when he continued: "I am impetuous, but impetuosity has made me what I am. I act, and then mold fate to suit my own ends. Opportunity has delivered to me my heart's desire, and I will not be cheated out of it. Among the men I brought with me to La Feria is a priest. He is dirty, for I caught him as he was fleeing toward the border; but he is a priest, and he will marry us to-night."

Alaire managed to gasp, "Surely you are not in earnest."

"Indeed I am! That is why I insisted that you dine with me this evening. I cannot waste more time here, for necessity calls me away. You shall go as my wife."

"Do you think I would remarry on the very day I find myself a widow?"

"The world will never know."

"You dare to say that!" Her tone was one of disgust, of finality. "I wonder how I have listened to so much. It is horrible."

"You are still a little hysterical, and you exaggerate. If I had more time I could afford to wait." He ogled her with his luminous gaze. "I would let you play with me to your heart's content and exercise your power until you tired and were ready to surrender."

Alaire raised her head proudly, her nostrils dilated, her eyes ablaze with hostility. "This is very humiliating, but you force me to tell you that I hate you."

Longorio was incredulous rather than offended. He drew himself up to his full height and smiled, saying, "That is impossible." Then, ignoring her impatience: "Come! You cannot deceive me. The priest is waiting."

When Alaire spoke next it was with an expression and with a tone of such loathing that his yellow face paled. "Your conceit is insufferable," she breathed.

After a brief struggle with himself, the Mexican cried, hoarsely: "I will not be refused. You wish me to tame you, eh? Good! You have found your master. Make your choice, then. Which shall it be, surrender or—compulsion?"

"So! You have been lying, as I thought. Compulsion! Now the real Longorio speaks."

He flung up his hands as if to ward off her fury. "No! Have I not made myself clear? I shall embrace you only with the arms of a husband, for this is not the passion of a moment, but of a lifetime, and I have myself to consider. The wife of Mexico's next President must be above reproach; there must be no scandal, no secrets hidden away for enemies to unearth. She must stand before the people as a perfect woman; she must lend prestige to his name. When I speak of compulsion, then, I mean the right of a husband—"

Alaire uttered an exclamation of disgust and turned away, but he intercepted her, saying: "You cannot hold me at bay. It is destiny. You shall be mine to-night. Think a moment! We are alone in the heart of a country lacking in every law but mine. Your friends do not know where you are, and, even if they knew, they could not help you. Your nation's protest would avail nothing. Outside of these walls are enemies who will not let you leave this house except under the protection of my name."

"Then I shall never leave it," she told him.

For the first time Longorio spoke roughly: "I lose patience. In God's name have I not waited long enough? My strength is gone." Impulsively he half encircled her with his thin arms, but she seemed armored with ice, and he dropped them. She could hear him grind his teeth. "I dare not lay hands upon you," he chattered. "Angel of my dreams, I am faint with longing. To love you and yet to be denied; to feel myself aflame and yet to see you cold; to be halted at the very doors of Paradise! What torture!"

The fellow's self-control in the midst of his frenzy frightened Alaire more than did his wildest avowals; it was in something of a panic that she said:

"One moment you tell me I am safe, the next you threaten me. You say I am free, and yet you coerce me. Prove your love. Let me go—"

"No! No! I shall call the priest."

Longorio turned toward the door, but half-way across the floor he was halted by a woman's shriek which issued from somewhere inside the house. It was repeated. There was an outburst in a masculine voice, then the patter of footsteps approaching down the tiled hallway. Dolores burst into her mistress's presence, her face blanched, her hair disordered. She flung herself into Alaire's arms, crying:

"*Señora!* Save me! God's curse on the ruffian. Oh—"

"Dolores!" Alaire exclaimed. "What has happened?"

Longorio demanded, irritably: "Yes. Why are you yelling like this?"

"A man— See! One of those dirty *peladors*. Look where he tore my dress! I warned him, but he was like a tiger. Benito will kill me when he learns—"

"Calm yourself. Speak sensibly. Tell me what happened."

"One of those miserable soldiers who came to-day—pig!" Dolores was shaking, her voice was shrill. "He followed me. He has been drinking. He followed me about like a cat, purring and grinning and saying the most horrible things. Just now, when I went to your room, he was waiting in the darkness and he seized me. God! It was dreadful."

"A soldier? One of my men?" Longorio was incredulous.

Alaire turned upon him with a blazing anger in her face. "Is this more of your protection?" she stormed. "I give you and your men the freedom of my ranch, and you insult me while they assault my women."

He ignored her accusation, inquiring of the elder woman, "Who was the fellow?"

"How do I know," Dolores sobbed. "He is a—a thick, black fellow with a scar on his lip, like a snarl."

"Felipe!"

"Yes, Felipe! I believe they called him that."

Longorio strode to the end of the living-room, flung open the wooden shutters of a window and, leaning far out, whistled sharply on his fingers.

"*Oiga! Teniente!* Ho, you fellows!" he shouted.

From the darkness a voice answered; a man, evidently on guard, came running.

"Call old Pancho," the general directed. "Tell him to bring me black Felipe, the fellow with the torn lip. Quick!"

"Yes, general," came the voice; then the metallic rattle of spurs and accoutrements as the sentry trotted away.

Dolores had completely broken down now, and Alaire was trying to comfort her. Their guest remained by the window, frowning. After a time there sounded a murmur of voices, then a shuffling of feet in the hall; Alaire's friend, the old lieutenant, appeared in the doorway, saluting. Behind him were several others.

"Here is Felipe," he announced.

"Bring him in."

A sullen, frowning man in soiled uniform was pushed forward, and Dolores hid her face against her mistress's shoulder.

"Is this the fellow?" Longorio inquired.

Dolores nodded.

"Well, what have you to say for yourself?" The general transfixed his trooper with a stare; then, as the latter seemed bereft of his voice, "Why did you enter this house?"

Felipe moistened his scarred lips. "That woman is—nice and clean. She's not so old, either, when you come to look at her." He grinned at his comrades, who had crowded in behind old Pancho.

"So! Let us go outside and learn more about this." Longorio waved his men before him and followed them out of the room and down the hall and into the night.

When a moment or two had dragged past, Dolores quavered. "What are they going to do with him?"

"I don't know. Anyhow, you need not fear—"

There sounded the report of a gun-shot, deadened indeed by the thick adobe walls of the house, yet sudden and loud enough to startle the women.

When Longorio reappeared he found Alaire standing stiff and white against the wall, with Dolores kneeling, her face still buried in her mistress's gown.

"Give yourself no concern," he told them, quickly. "I beg a thousand pardons for Felipe. Henceforth no one will molest you."

"Was that a—shot?" Alaire inquired faintly.

"Yes. It is all settled."

"You killed him?"

The general nodded. "Purely for the sake of discipline—one has to be firm. Now your woman is badly frightened. Send her away so that we may reach an understanding."

"Oh—h! This is frightful," Alaire gasped. "I can't talk to you. Go— Let me go."

The man pondered for an instant. "Perhaps that would be better," he agreed, reluctantly, "for I see you, too, are unstrung. Very well! My affairs will have to wait. Take a few hours to think over what I have told you. When you have slept you will feel differently about me. You will meet me with a smile, eh?" He beamed hopefully.

"Sleep? You expect me to sleep?"

"Please," he begged. "Beauty is like a delicate flower, and sleep is the dew that freshens it. Believe me, you can rest in all security, for no one can come or go without my consent. You are cruel to postpone my delight; nevertheless, I yield to your feelings. But, star of my life, I shall dream of you, and of that little priest who waits with the key of Paradise in his hands."

He bowed over Alaire's cold fingers, then stood erect until she and Dolores had gone.

XXIX

THE PRIEST FROM MONCLOVA

THAT was a night of terror for the women. Although Longorio's discipline was in some ways strict, in others it was extremely lax. From some quarter his men had secured a supply of *mescal*, and, forgetful of Felipe's unhappy fate, they rendered the hours hideous. There were singing and quarreling, and a shot or two sounded from the direction of the outbuildings. Morning found both Alaire and Dolores sadly overwrought. But they felt some relief upon learning that the general had been unexpectedly summoned from his bed at daylight, and had ridden to the telegraph-office.

Profiting by his absence, Alaire ventured from her room, racking her brain to devise some means of escape. But soldiers were everywhere; they lolled around the servants' quarters; they dozed in the shade of the ranch buildings, recovering from the night's debauch; and an armed sentinel who paced the *hacienda* road gave evidence that, despite their apparent carelessness, they had by no means relaxed their vigilance. A round of the premises convinced Alaire that the place was effectually guarded, and showed her the futility of trying to slip away. She realized, too, that even if she managed to do so, her plight would be little better. For how could she hope to cover the hundred miles between La Feria and the Rio Grande when every *peon* was an enemy?

She was standing in one of the open, sashless windows when her former protector, the old lieutenant, bade her good morning and paused to smoke a cigarette.

"Well, it was a great night, wasn't it?" he began. "And we have great news this morning. We are going to fight you *Gringos*."

"I hope not."

"Yes; it will probably go hard with you. Tell me, this city of Washington is a fine city, and very rich, is it not?"

"Oh yes."

"It's full of loot, eh? Especially the President's palace? That is good. One can never believe all one hears."

"Why do you ask?" Alaire was curious.

"I was thinking it would pay us to go there. If your soldiers march upon Mexico City, it would be a brilliant piece of strategy for General Longorio to invade the United States, would it not? It would be funny to capture Washington and hold your President for ransom, eh?"

"Very funny," Alaire agreed, dryly. "How would you go about it?"

Pancho shrugged. "That is the trouble. We would have to march around Texas, I presume."

"Around Texas?"

"Yes. You see, Texas is a bad country; it is full of—barbarians who know how to fight. If it were not for Texas we would have the United States at our mercy." After some consideration he ventured this opinion: "We could afford to pay the Texans for allowing us to ride through their country, provided we stole nothing and paid for the cattle we ate. Well, Longorio is a great one for schemes; he is talking over the telegraph with somebody at this moment. Perhaps it is the President of Texas."

"You are a poor man, are you not?" Alaire inquired.

"Miserably poor."

"Would you like to make a great deal of money?"

"*Dios!* That is why I'm a soldier."

"I will pay you well to get me two horses—"

But old Pancho shook his head vigorously. "Impossible! General Longorio is going to marry you. We all got drunk last night to celebrate the wedding. Yes, and the priest is waiting."

"I will make you rich."

"Ho! I wouldn't live to spend a single *peso*. Felipe disobeyed orders, and the general shot him before he could cross himself. Boom! The poor fellow was in hell in a minute. No. We will all be rich after we win a few battles and capture some American cities. I am an old man; I shall leave the drinking and the women to the young fellows, and prepare for my old age."

Seeing that she could not enlist Pancho's aid, Alaire begged him to fetch the priest.

"You wish spiritual comfort, *señora?*"

"Perhaps."

"Well, he doesn't look like much of a priest, but probably he will do. As for me, I don't believe in such things. Churches are all very well for ignorant people, but we Mexicans are too intelligent; we are making an end of them."

The priest was a small, white-haired man with a gentle, almost timid face, and at the moment when he appeared before Alaire he was in anything but a happy frame of mind. He had undergone, he told her, a terrible experience. His name was O'Malley. He had come from Monclova, whence the Rebels had banished him under threat of death. He had seen his church despoiled of its valuables, his school closed; he himself had managed to escape only by a miracle. During his flight toward the border he had suffered every indignity, and finally Longorio had intercepted him and brought him here, practically in chains.

"What a situation! What chaos!" he lamented. "The land is overrun with bandits; there is no law, no authority, no faith; religion is made a mockery. The men are becoming infidels and atheists, and in many places they will not allow us to give comfort even to their women."

"Is it as bad as that?"

Father O'Malley shook his head sadly. "You've no idea. What do you think of a people who forbid the mention of God's name in their schools? That is what the revolutionists are doing. Candeleria claims that the churches are the property of the State. He confiscates them, and he charges admission. He has banished all except a few of us priests, and has shamefully persecuted our Sisters of Mercy. Oh, the outrages! Mexico is, to-day, the blackest spot on the map of Christendom." His voice broke. "That is the freedom, the liberty, the democracy, for which they are fighting. That is the new Mexico. And the Federals are not a bit better. This Longorio, for instance, this—wolf—he brings me here, as his prisoner, to solemnize an unholy marriage! He treats me like a dog. Last night I slept in a filthy hovel—"

"Oh! I'm sorry," Alaire exclaimed. "But I'm half crazed with my own troubles. You must come into the house; the best I have is yours. You shall be as much my guest as I can make you, and—perhaps you will help me to escape."

"Escape?" The little man smiled mournfully. "You are watched and guarded, and so am I. Even if you got away from here, what then? You can't imagine the condition of the country."

"I won't marry him!" Alaire cried, with a shudder. "I won't!"

"He can't very well force you to do so. But remember, these are war times; the man is a fiend, and he puts no restraint upon his desires. If he is madly bent on having you, how can you prevent it? In normal times he would not dare injure one so prominent as you, but now—" Father O'Malley lifted his hands. "I only wonder that he suggests a lawful marriage. Suppose you refuse? Will he not sacrifice you to his passions? He has done worse things." After a moment's consideration he said: "Of course it is possible that I misjudge him. Anyhow, if you desire me to do so I will refuse to perform the ceremony. But—I'm afraid it will just mean ruin for both of us."

"Surely he wouldn't harm you?"

The Father shrugged. "What am I? An obscure priest. Many of my brothers are buried in Mexico. However, I shall do as you wish."

As the day wore on Alaire realized even more clearly the fact that she was Longorio's prisoner. His men, in spite of their recent debauch, kept a very good watch over her, and it was plain that they would obey his orders, no matter how extreme. It occurred to her finally that he was staying away purposely, in order to give her a fuller appreciation of her position—so that she might beat her wings against the cage until exhausted.

Afternoon came, then evening, and still Longorio did not return. Father O'Malley could give scant comfort; Dolores was a positive trial.

Half distracted, Alaire roamed through the house, awaiting her captor's coming, steeling herself for their final battle. But the delay was trying; she longed for the crisis to come, that this intolerable suspense might be ended. At such an hour her thoughts naturally turned to Dave Law, and she found herself yearning for him with a yearning utterly new. His love had supported her through those miserable days at Las Palmas, but now it was a torture; she called his name wildly, passionately. He knew her whereabouts and her peril—why did he not come? Then, more calmly, she asked herself what he, or what any one, could do for her. How could she look for succor when two nations were at war?

Night had come before she finally gave up and acknowledged the hopelessness of her situation. She had fought bravely, but with darkness her fears grew blacker. She was on the verge of her first breakdown when, in the early dusk outside, she heard voices and the stamping of horses' hoofs. The sounds were muffled by the heavy wooden shutters she had taken pains to close and bar, but they told her that Longorio had returned. Since it was futile to deny him entrance, she waited where she was. Old Pancho's voice sounded outside; then there came a knock upon the door of the room in which she stood.

"Come in," she said, tensely.

The lieutenant thrust his head in and, removing his hat, announced, "There is some one here to see General Longorio on important business. He says you will do."

"I?"

"Yes. He says he is one of us—"

Pancho was pushed aside, the door was flung back, and a man strode swiftly into the lamplight. He paused, blinking as if momentarily blinded, and Alaire clutched at the nearest chair for support. A roaring began in her ears; she felt herself sway forward as if the strength had left her knees. She heard Dave's voice faintly; he was saying:

"Take care of my horse. Feed and water her well. Understand? When General Longorio comes tell him I am waiting here."

As if in a dream, Alaire saw the Mexican go out, closing the door behind him. Then she saw Dave come toward her, heard him speak her name, felt his arms around her.

Alaire did not swoon, but she never could remember very distinctly those first few moments. Scarcely knowing what she did, she found herself clinging to her lover, laughing, weeping, feeling him over with shaking hands that would not be convinced of his reality. She was aware of his kisses upon her lips, her eyes, her hair; he was saying something which she could not understand because of that roaring in her ears.

"You heard me calling," she told him at last. "Oh, I was—so frightened!" She clung closer to him. After a time she discovered that she was mechanically nodding and shaking her head at the questions he was putting to her, but had only the vaguest idea what they were. By and by she began to tell him about Longorio, speaking in a sort of hypnotic murmur, as if her words issued at his mental suggestion. And all the time she snuggled against his breast.

"Dearest!" Dave held her away in gentle hands. "I was afraid you'd go to pieces like this, but I had to break through the best way I could. I learned you were here and something about what was going on from the people at the next ranch. But I expected to find *him* here, too."

"How did you manage to get here?"

"I hardly know. I just wouldn't let 'em stop me. This lieutenant wouldn't let me in until I told him I was from Monterey with important news. I don't remember all I did tell him. I tried to get here last night, but I had trouble. They caught me, and I had to buy my way through. I've bribed and bullied and lied clear from Romero. I reckon they couldn't imagine I'd risk being here if I wasn't a friend."

It was more Dave's tone than his words that roused Alaire to an appreciation of what he said.

"Are you alone?" she asked, in vague dismay. "Then what are we going to do?"

"I don't know yet. My plans ended here."

"Dave! You rode in just to find me! Just to be with me?"

"Yes. And to get *him*." Alaire saw his face twitch;

and realized that it was very haggard, very old and tired. "They lifted my guns—a bunch of fellows at the Rio Negro crossing. Some of them were drunk and wouldn't believe I was an *amigo*. So I finally had to ride for it."

"Can't you take me away?" she asked, faintly. "What will you do when—he comes?"

"I reckon I'll manage him somehow." His grip upon her tightened painfully, and she could feel him tremble. "I was afraid I wouldn't find you. I— O God, Alaire!" He buried his face in her hair.

"I had a terrible scene with him last night. He insists upon marrying me. I—I was hoping you'd come."

"How could I, when nobody knew where you were?"

"Didn't you know? I wrote you." He shook his head. "Then how did you learn?"

"From José. I caught him within an hour of the murder, and made him tell me everything."

Alaire's eyes dilated; she held herself away, saying, breathlessly: "Murder! Is that what it was? He—Longorio—told me something quite different."

"Naturally. It was he who hired José to do the shooting."

"Oh-h!" Alaire hid her face in her hands. She looked up again quickly, however, and her cheeks were white. "Then he won't spare you, Dave." She choked for an instant. "We must get away before he comes. There *must* be some way of escape. Think!"

"I'm pretty tired to think. I'm pretty near played out," he confessed.

"They're watching me, but they'd let you go."

"Now that I'm here I'm going to stay until—"

She interrupted, crying his name loudly. "Dave!"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Wait! Let me think." She closed her eyes; her brows drew together as if in the labor of concentration. When she lifted her lids her eyes were alight, her voice was eager. "I know how. I see it. He won't dare—But you must do what I tell you."

"Of course."

"No questions. Understand?"

When he nodded impatiently she ran to the door and, flinging it open, called down the hall:

"Father! Father O'Malley! Quick!" Then she summoned Dolores.

The priest answered; he hurried from his room and, with a dazed lack of comprehension, acknowledged his swift introduction to Dave. Alaire was keenly alive and vibrant with purpose now. Dolores, too, came running, and while the men were exchanging greetings her mistress murmured something in her ear, then hastened her departure with a quick push. Turning upon the others, Alaire explained:

"I've sent for some of the women, and they'll be here in a minute. Father, this man has come for me. He loves me. Will you marry us, before Longorio arrives?"

"Alaire!" Dave exclaimed.

She stilled him with a gesture. "Quick! Will you?"

Father O'Malley was bewildered. "I don't understand," he expostulated.

"Nor I," echoed Dave.

"You don't need to understand. I know what I'm doing. I've thought of a way to save us all."

Through Dave's mind flashed the memory of that thing which had haunted him and made his life a nightmare. An incoherent refusal was upon his lips, but Alaire's face besought him; it was shining with a strange, new ecstasy, and he could not bring himself to deny her. Of what her plan consisted he had only the dimmest idea, but he assured himself that it could by no possibility succeed. After all, what did it matter? he asked himself. They were trapped. This might serve, somehow, to cheat Longorio, and—Alaire would be his wife.

"Very well," he stammered, weakly. "What are you thinking of?"

"I haven't thought it all out yet, but—"

At that moment Dolores returned, bringing with her the three black-haired, black-shawled house servants, bundling them through the door and ranging them along the wall.

Father O'Malley's face was puckered; he said, hesitatingly: "My dear madam, this isn't regular; you are not Catholics. How can I bless you?"

"You can marry us legally, just the same, can't you?" Alaire was breathing rapidly, and some part of her eagerness began to thrill her hearers.

"Oh yes, but—"

"Then marry us. And make haste, please! Please!"

Law nodded. He could not speak, for his mouth was dry. A voice within him shouted a warning, but he would not listen. His heart was beating violently; his temples were pounding: all the blood of his body seemed centered in his head.

Before the eyes of the four wondering women Father O'Malley married them. It seemed to Alaire that he would never reach the end, although, in fact, he stumbled through the ceremony swiftly. Alaire clipped his last words short by crying:

"Tell these people so that they'll understand what it all means. Tell them to remember they have seen a marriage by the Church."

The priest did as he was directed, and his audience signified their understanding. Then Dolores led them out.

XXX

THE MAN OF DESTINY

"NOW, then, I'll explain," said Alaire, turning to the men. "Longorio declares he won't have me except as his wife, and I think he means it. He is amazingly egotistical. He has tremendous ambitions. He thinks this war is his great opportunity, and he means to be President—he's sure of it. He loves me, but he loves himself better, I'm sure. Now, don't you see? He'll have to choose one or the other."

Father O'Malley did not appear to appreciate the full force of this reasoning. "My dear," he said, gravely, "he can make you a widow again. In such times as these men are savages."

"Oh, but that's not all." Alaire turned to her newly made husband. "They let you in, and they'll let you out again—if you go quickly, before it's known what we've done."

Dave stared at her in bewilderment. "I? I go, and—leave you?" He seemed doubtful of her sanity.

"Yes." When he laughed shortly, Alaire cried: "Dave, you must! Don't you see what I'm driving at? If he can't marry me, if he finds you're gone and he can't lay hands on you, what can he do but let me go? Dave dear, for my sake, for the sake of us both—"

"You're excited," he told her, and drew her to himself gently.

"Please! *Please!*" she implored.

"You don't know that man," said Father O'Malley, with conviction.

But Alaire insisted, half hysterically now: "I do; that's just it, I *do* know him. He is planning the greatest things for himself, his head is in the clouds, and he daren't do the things he used to do. That's why I called in those women as witnesses. He can't put *them* out of the way. With Dave gone I'll be safe. He can't ignore our marriage. But otherwise— There's no telling what he may do. Why, he'll kill you, Dave, as he killed Ed." She upturned a face eloquent with pleading. "Won't you do this for me?"

"No!" Law declared, firmly. "You wouldn't ask it if you were in your senses. Get me a gun and I'll shoot my way out. We'll go until they stop us. But don't ask me to leave you."

She searched his face eagerly, piteously, then with a quivering sigh relaxed her tension. "Then we've only made matters worse. You've spoiled our only chance."

Father O'Malley, who had been lost in thought, spoke up again: "Perhaps you will let me try my wits. But first, do I understand that it was he who effected the death of—Mr. Austin?"

Dave recounted as coherently as he could the circumstances of Ed's death, and told how he had learned, through José, of Longorio's intentions. As the priest listened a spot of color grew in his cheeks, his eyes glowed with indignation. He was about to make known what was in his mind when Alaire raised her hand and in a strained whisper exclaimed:

"'Sh-h! Listen!"

The heavy door of the *hacienda* creaked, a quick tread sounded on the tiles, the door to the living-room was flung open, and Longorio entered. He was hot and dusty from his ride, but with a lover's impetuosity he had made straight for this lighted room.

For the briefest instant he balanced himself just inside the portal, and the smile remained fixed upon his lips. Then his eyes became ringed with white and he made a swift, catlike movement of retreat. Plainly this was the supremest surprise of his lifetime, and he seemed to doubt his senses. But he recovered quickly. Thrusting his head forward, he demanded:

"What is this? You—and you?" He stared from Dave to the priest, then back again.

They all spoke at once, but he heard only Alaire's words:

"He came to find me."

Pancho appeared in the doorway behind Longorio, saying, "I heard you ride up, sir, so I ran to tell you about this fellow."

But the general cut him short. "Call your men, quick," he cried in a voice that sent the soldier leaping back into the night.

Alaire was clinging to Dave, merely clutching him the tighter when he tried to unclasp her hold. Her movement into the shelter of his rival's arms infuriated Longorio, who uttered an exclamation and fumbled uncertainly with his holster. But his fingers were clumsy. He could not take his eyes from the pair, and he seemed upon the point of rushing forward to tear them apart.

"Don't touch her! Don't—" he began, cursing in a high-pitched voice. "God! What a reckoning!" Then he stamped his feet, he wrung his hands, he called shrilly at the top of his voice: "Lieutenant! Ho, Pancho! You fellows! Quickly!" Under the stress of his excitement the feminine side of his character betrayed itself.

Alaire felt her newly made husband gather himself for a spring; he was muttering to her to release him; he was trying to push her aside, but she held fast with the strength of desperation.

"You can't harm us," she declared, flinging her words defiantly at the Mexican. "You dare not. You are too late. Father O'Malley has just married us."

Longorio uttered a peculiar, wordless cry of dismay; his mouth fell open; his arms dropped; he went limp all over, paralyzed momentarily by surprise and horror; his eyes protruded; he swayed as if his sight had blurred.

"I said I'd never marry you," she rushed on, vibrantly. "This is the man I love—the only man. Yes, and I've learned the truth about you. I know who killed Mr. Austin."

Longorio did a very unexpected thing then; slowly, unconsciously, as if the movement were the result of a half-forgotten training, he crossed himself.

But now from the hall at his back came the pounding of boot-heels, and a half-dozen panting troopers tumbled through the door. He waved them back and out into the hall again.

Father O'Malley, who had been trying to make himself heard, stepped in front of the general and said, solemnly: "Take care what you do, Longorio. I have married these people, and you can't undo what I have done. We are American citizens. The laws of civilization protect us."

The Mexican fought for his voice, then stammered: "You are my priest; I brought you here. I offered to marry her. Now—you force me to damn my soul." Turning his eyes wildly upon Alaire, he shouted: "Too late, eh? You say I am too late! It seems that I am barely in time."

Dave added his words to the others: "You are ten to one, but you can't have her," he cried, defiantly. "José Sanchez confessed to the murder of Mr. Austin, and told how you had got Mrs. Austin to come here. The whole thing is known in Washington and Mexico City by this time. The newspapers have it; everybody knows you are keeping her as your prisoner, and that I have come for her. If she is harmed, all Mexico, all the world, will know that you are worse than a murderer."

Longorio reached behind his back and slammed the door in the faces of his listening men.

"What is this? What did José confess?" he inquired, sharply.

"He swears you hired him."

"Bah! The word of a *pelador*."

In spite of the man's contemptuous tone Dave saw the expression in his face and made a quick decision. "There's a limit to what you dare to do, Longorio. I'm unarmed; I make no resistance, so there is no excuse for violence. I surrender to you, and claim protection for myself and my wife."

But Longorio was not to be tricked. "Good!" he cried, triumphantly. "I have been looking forward to something like this, and I shall give myself a great pleasure." He laid a hand upon the door-knob, but before he could turn it the Catholic priest had him by the arm, and with a strength surprising in one of his stature wrenched him away. Father O'Malley's face was white and terrible; his voice was deep, menacing; the hand he raised above Longorio seemed to brandish a weapon.

"Stop!" he thundered. "Are you a madman? Destruction hangs over you; destruction of body and soul. You dare not separate those whom God hath joined."

"God! God!" the other shrilled. "I don't believe in Him. I am a god; I know of no other."

"Blasphemer!" roared the little man. "Listen, then. So surely as you harm these people, so surely do you kill your earthly prospects. You, the first man of Mexico, the Dictator indeed! Think what you are doing before it is too late. Is your dream of greatness only a dream? Will you sacrifice yourself and all your aspirations in the heat of this unholy and impossible passion? To-night, now, you must choose whether you will be famous or infamous, glorious or shameful, honored or dishonored! Restrain your hatred and conquer your lust, or forego for ever your dreams of empire and pass into oblivion."

"You are a meddler," Longorio stormed. "You make a loud noise, but I shall rid Mexico of your kind. We shall have no more of you priests."

Father O'Malley shook the speaker as a parent shakes an unruly child. "See! You have completely lost your head. But I want you to listen to what I am saying. Whether you are more good than evil, God must judge, but the people of Mexico are good people, and they will not be ruled by a man who is wholly bad. You have the power to remove this man and this woman, yes, and this priest who dares to point out the pit at your feet; but if you do you will never command another Mexican army. There is no war. We are not your enemies. The world knows we are here, and it holds you accountable for our safety. To-morrow you will have to face the reckoning."

Longorio listened. It was plain that he recognized the truth of O'Malley's words, but he was convulsed with rage.

"Good!" he cried. "I see my dreams dissolve, but I am not the first great man to trade an empire for a woman. Antony, the Roman general, laid his honor in a woman's arms. I had a shining destiny, but Mexico will be the sufferer by my betrayal. Instead of Longorio the Deliverer, I shall be known as Longorio the Lover, the man who gave all—"

O'Malley interrupted forcefully. "Enough of this! Come with me. I have something more to say to you." He flung open the door into the hall and, taking the general by the arm, fairly dragged him from the room and into the one opposite. The lieutenant and his men looked on in amazement, shuffling their feet and shifting their rifle-butts noisily upon the floor.

Alaire turned an anxious face to Dave, saying: "He is wonderful. Longorio is almost—afraid of him."

"Yes; he may bring him to his senses. If he doesn't—" Dave cast his eyes desperately over the room, conscious all the time that he was being watched with suspicion by the men outside. He stirred restlessly and moistened his lips. "Longorio would be crazy to injure you."

Ten minutes passed; fifteen. Alaire leaned, motionless, against the table; Dave paced about, followed by the eyes of the soldiers. One of the latter struck a match, and in the silence it sounded like a gun-shot. Dave started, at which the soldiers laughed. They began to talk in murmurs. The odor of cigarette smoke drifted in to the man and the woman.

Finally the door through which Father O'Malley and Longorio had passed opened, and the priest emerged. He was alone. His face was flushed and damp; his eyes were glowing. He forced the Mexicans out of his way and, entering the living-room, closed the door behind him.

"Well?" his two friends questioned, anxiously.

"I've done all I can. The rest is out of our hands." The little man sat down heavily and mopped his forehead.

"What does he say?"

"He told me to come here and wait. I never saw a man so torn, so distracted."

"Then he is wavering. Oh-h!" Alaire clasped her hands in thanksgiving, but the Father cautioned her:

"Don't be too sanguine. He is not afraid of consequences. He appears to have no conscience. He is without mercy and seems lost to shame. I have never met a man quite like him. Do you know what he feels at this moment? Chagrin. Yes, mortification raised to the highest pitch, and a sort of stupefaction that you should prefer another man to him. He can't understand your lack of taste." Father O'Malley smiled faintly.

"Conceited idiot," Dave growled.

"His humiliation kills him. When I saw that it was useless to appeal to him on moral grounds, and that threats were unavailing, I took another course. Something gave me insight into his mind, and the power to talk as I have never talked before. All in a flash I saw the man's soul laid bare before me, and—I think I played upon it with some cunning. I don't remember all I said, for I was inspired, but I appealed to his vanity and to his conceit, and as I went along I impressed upon him, over and over, the fact that the world knows we are here and that it trusts him. He aspires to the Presidency; he believes he is destined to be Mexico's Dictator; so I painted a picture that surpassed his own imaginings. He would have been suspicious of mere flattery, so I went far beyond that and inflamed him with such extravagant visions as only a child or an unblushing egotist like him could accept. I swelled his vanity; I inflated his conceit. For a moment, at least, I lifted him out of himself and raised him to the heights."

From beyond the closed door came Longorio's voice, issuing some command to his men. A moment passed; then he appeared before the three Americans. He seemed taller, thinner, more erect and hawklike than ever. His head was held more proudly and his chest was fuller. A set, disdainful smile was graven upon his face.

He began by addressing his words directly to Alaire. "*Señora*," he said, "I am a man of deep feeling and I scorn deceit. Therefore I offer no apology for my recent display of emotion. If I have seemed to press my advances with undue fervor, it is because, at heart, I am as great a lover as I am a statesman or a soldier. But there are other things than love. Nature constituted me a leader, and he who climbs high must climb alone. I offered Chapultepec as a shrine for your beauty. I offered to share Mexico with you, and I told you that I would not be content with less than all of you. Well, I meant it. Otherwise—I would take you now." His voice throbbed with a sudden fierce desire, and his long, lean hands closed convulsively. "You must realize that I have the courage and the power to defy the world, eh?" He seemed to challenge denial of this statement, but, receiving none, he went on, fixing his brilliant, feverish eyes once more upon Alaire. "As a man of sentiment I am unique; I am different from any you have ever known. I would not possess a flower without its fragrance. You did not believe me when I told you that, but I am going to prove it. All your life you are going to think of me as heroic. Perhaps no patriot in history ever made a more splendid sacrifice for his country than I make now. Some day the world will wonder how I had the strength to put aside love and follow the path of duty."

Alaire trusted herself to ask, "Then we are free to go?"

The general's face was swept by a grimace intended for a smile. "I have ordered your horses to be saddled."

Dave, who had with difficulty restrained his anger at the fellow's bombast, was upon the point of speaking when Father O'Malley took the words out of his mouth:

"Would you send this woman out of her own house into a country like—like this? Remember the fortune in cattle you have already taken—"

Longorio broke in with a snarl: "Is it my fault that the country is in arms? Military necessity compels me to remain here. I consider myself magnanimous. I—" His voice cracked, and he made a despairing, violent gesture. "Go, before I change my mind."

Dave signaled to the others, and Alaire slipped away to make herself ready. During the uncomfortable silence which succeeded her departure, Longorio paced the room, keeping his eyes resolutely turned away from Law.

"Do you mean that I, too, may go?" O'Malley inquired.

"What good are you to me?" snapped the general.

"You will give us safe conduct?"

"Be still, priest!" Longorio glared at the speaker, clasping and unclasping his fists behind his back.

With the sound of hoofs outside, Alaire and Dolores appeared, and the Mexican straightened himself with an effort.

"*Adios, señora!*" he said, with a stiff bow. "We have had a pleasant friendship and a thrilling flirtation, eh? I shall never cease to regret that Fate interrupted at such an interesting moment. *Adios! Adios!*" He bowed formally, in turn to Dave and to the priest, then resumed his pacing, with his hands at his back and his brow furrowed as if in a struggle with affairs of greater moment than this.

But when he heard the outside door creak shut behind them his indifference vanished and he halted with head turned in an effort to catch the last sounds of their departure. His face was like tallow now, his lips were drawn back from his teeth as if in supreme agony. A moment and the hoof-beats had died away. Then Longorio slipped his leash.

He uttered a cry—a hoarse, half-strangled shriek that tore his throat. He plucked the collar from his neck as if it choked him; he beat his breast. Seizing whatever article his eye fell upon, he tore and crushed it; he swept the table clean of its queer Spanish bric-à-brac, and trampled the litter under his heels. Spying a painting of a saint upon the wall, he ran to it, ripped it from its nail, and, raising it over his head, smashed frame and glass, cursing all saints, all priests, and churchly people. Havoc followed him as he raged about the place wreaking his fury upon inanimate objects. When he had well-nigh wrecked the contents of the room, and when his first paroxysm had spent its violence, he hurled himself into a chair, writhing in agony. He bit his wrists, he pounded his fists, he kicked; finally he sprawled full length upon the floor, clawing at the cool, smooth tiles until his nails bled.

"Christ! O Christ!" he screamed.

The sound of his blasphemies reached the little group of soldiers who had lingered curiously outside, and they listened open-mouthed. One by one they crossed themselves and stole away into the darkness, muttering.

XXXI

A SPANISH WILL

WITH a singing heart Alaire rode through the night at her husband's side. The strain of the last few hours had been so intense, the relief at her deliverance so keen, that now she felt curiously weak, and she kept close to Dave, comforted by his nearness and secure in the knowledge of his strength.

Although he was unusually taciturn and rode with his chin upon his breast, she attributed his silence to fatigue. Now and then, therefore, she spurred to his side and spoke softly, caressingly. At such times he reached for her hand and clung to it.

Dave was indeed weary; he was, in fact, in a sort of stupor, and not infrequently he dozed for a moment or two in his saddle. Yet it was not this which stilled his tongue, but a growing sense of guilt and dismay at what he had brought upon himself. In a moment of weakness he had done the very thing against which he had fought so bitterly, and now he faced the consequences. How, when, where could he find strength to undo his action? he asked himself. The weight of this question bent his shoulders, paralyzed his wits.

Some two hours out from La Feria the riders halted at a point where the road dipped into a rocky stream-bed; then, as the horses drank, Dolores voiced a thought that had troubled all of them.

"If that bandit really means to spare us, why did he send us away in the night, like this?" she asked. "I shall be surprised if we are not assassinated before morning."

"He must have meant it." Alaire spoke with a conviction she did not entirely feel. "Father O'Malley aroused the finer side of his nature."

"Perhaps," agreed the priest. "Somewhere in him there is a fear of God."

But Dave was skeptical. "More likely a fear of the *Gringo* Government," said he. "Longorio is a four-flusher. When he realized he was licked he tried to save his face by a grandstand play. He didn't want to let us go."

"Then what is to prevent him from—well, from having us followed?" Alaire inquired.

"Nothing," Dave told her.

As they climbed the bank and rode onward into the night she said: "No matter what happens, dear, I shall be happy, for at last one of my dreams has come true." He reached out and patted her. "You've no idea what a coward I was until you came. But the moment I saw you all my fears vanished. I was like a lost child who suddenly sees her father; in your arms I felt perfectly safe, for the first time in all my life, I think. I—I couldn't bear to go on without you, after this."

Dave found nothing to say; they rode along side by side for a time in a great contentment that required no speech. Then Alaire asked:

"Dear, have you considered how we—are going to explain our marriage?"

"Won't the circumstances explain it?"

"Perhaps. And yet— It seems ages since I learned—what happened to Ed, but in reality it's only a few hours. Won't people talk?"

Dave caught at the suggestion. "I see. Then let's keep it secret for the present. I promise not to—act like a husband."

With a little reckless laugh she confessed, "I—I'm afraid I'll find it difficult to be conventional."

"My wife!" he cried in sharp agony. Leaning far out, he encircled her with his arm; then, half lifting her from her saddle, he crushed his lips to hers. It was his first display of emotion since Father O'Malley had united them.

There were few villages along the road they followed, and because of the lateness of the hour all were dark, hence the party passed through without exciting attention except from an occasional wakeful dog. But as morning came and the east began to glow Dave told the priest:

"We've got to hide out during the day or we'll get into trouble. Besides, these women must be getting hungry."

"I fear there is something feminine about me," confessed the little man. "I'm famished, too."

At the next *rancho* they came to they applied for shelter, but were denied; in fact, the owner cursed them so roundly for being Americans that they were glad to ride onward. A mile or two farther along they met a cart the driver of which refused to answer their greetings. As they passed out of his sight they saw that he had halted his lean oxen and was staring after them curiously. Later, when the sun was well up and the world had fully awakened, they descried a mounted man, evidently a cowboy, riding through the chaparral. He saw them, too, and came toward the road, but after a brief scrutiny he whirled his horse and galloped off through the cactus, shouting something over his shoulder.

"This won't do," O'Malley declared, uneasily. "I don't like the actions of these people. Let me appeal to the next person we meet. I can't believe they all hate us."

Soon they came to a rise in the road, and from the crest of this elevation beheld ahead of them a small village of white houses shining from the shelter of a grove. The *rancheria* was perhaps two miles away, and galloping toward it was the *vaquero* who had challenged them.

"That's the Rio Negro crossing," Dave announced. Then spying a little house squatting a short distance back from the road, he said: "We'd better try yonder. If they turn us down we'll have to take to the brush."

O'Malley agreed. "Yes, and we have no time to lose. That horseman is going to rouse the town. I'm afraid we're—in for it."

Dave nodded silently.

Leaving the beaten path, the refugees threaded their way through cactus and sage to a gate, entering which they approached the straw-thatched *jacal* they had seen. A naked boy baby watched them draw near, then scuttled for shelter, piping an alarm. A man appeared from somewhere, at sight of whom the priest rode forward with a pleasant greeting. But the fellow was unfriendly. His wife, too, emerged from the dwelling and joined her husband in warning Father O'Malley away.

"Let me try," Alaire begged, and spurred her horse up to the group. She smiled down at the country people, saying: "We have traveled a long way, and we're tired and hungry. Won't you give us something to eat? We'll pay you well for your trouble."

The man demurred sullenly, and began a refusal; but his wife, after a wondering scrutiny, interrupted him with a cry. Rushing forward, she took the edge of Alaire's skirt in her hands and kissed it.

"God be praised! A miracle!" she exclaimed. "Juan, don't you see? It is the beautiful *señora* for whom we pray every night of our lives. On your knees, shameless one! It is she who delivered you from the prison."

Juan stared unbelievingly, then his face changed; his teeth flashed in a smile, and, sweeping his hat from his head, he, too, approached Alaire.

"It is! *Señora*, I am Juan Garcia, whom you saved, and this is Inez," he declared. "Heaven bless you and forgive me."

"Now I know you," Alaire laughed, and slipped down from her saddle. "This is a happy meeting. So! You live here, and that was little Juan who ran away as if we were going to eat him. Well, we are hungry, but not hungry enough to devour Juanito."

Turning to her companions, she explained the circumstances of her first meeting with these good people, and as she talked the Garcias broke in joyfully, adding their own account of her goodness.

"We've fallen among friends," Alaire told Dave and Father O'Malley. "They will let us rest here, I am sure."

Husband and wife agreed in one voice. In fact, they were overjoyed at an opportunity of serving her; and little Juan, his suspicions partially allayed, issued from hiding and waddled forward to take part in the welcome.

Shamefacedly the elder Garcia explained his inhospitable reception of the travelers. "We hear the *Gringos* are coming to kill us and take our farms. Everybody is badly frightened. We are driving our herds away and hiding what we can. Yesterday at the big Obispo ranch our people shot two Americans and burned some of their houses. They intend to kill all the Americans they find, so you'd better be careful. Just now a fellow rode up shouting that you were coming, but of course I didn't know—"

"Yes, of course. We're trying to reach the border," Father O'Malley told him. "Will you hide us here until we can go on?"

Juan courtesied respectfully to the priest. "My house is yours, Father."

"Can you take care of our horses, too, and—give us a place to sleep?" Dave asked. His eyes were heavy; he had been almost constantly in the saddle since leaving Jonesville, and now could barely keep himself awake.

"Trust me," the Mexican assured them, confidently. "If somebody comes I'll send them away. Oh, I can lie with the best of them."

The Garcias were not ordinary people, and they lived in rather good circumstances for country folk. There were three rooms to their little house, all of which were reasonably clean. The food that Inez set before her guests, too, was excellent if scanty.

Juanito, taking the cue from his parents, flung himself whole-heartedly into the task of entertainment, and since Alaire met his advances half-way he began, before long, to look upon her with particular favor. Once they had thoroughly made friends, he showered her with the most flattering attentions. His shyness, it seemed, was but a pretense—at heart he was a bold and enterprising fellow—and so, as a mark of his admiration, he presented her with all his personal treasures. First he fetched and laid in her lap a cigar-box wagon with wooden wheels—evidently the handiwork of his father. Then he gave her, one by one, a highly prized blue bottle, a rusty Mexican spur, and the ruins of what had been a splendid clasp-knife. There were no blades in the knife, but he showed her how to peep through a tiny hole in the handle, where was concealed the picture of a dashing Spanish bull-fighter. The appreciation which these gifts evoked intoxicated the little man and roused him to a very madness of generosity. He pattered away and returned shortly, staggering and grunting under the weight of another and a still greater offering. It was a dog—a patient, hungry dog with very little hair. The animal was alive with fleas—it scratched absent-mindedly with one hind paw, even while Juanito strangled it against his naked breast—

but it was the apple of its owner's eye, and when Inez unfeelingly banished it from the house Juanito began to squall lustily. Nor could he be conciliated until Alaire took him upon her knee and told him about another boy, of precisely his own age and size, who planted a magic bean in his mother's dooryard, which grew up and up until it reached clear to the sky, where a giant lived. Juanito Garcia had never heard the like. He was spellbound with delight; he held his breath in ecstasy; only his toes moved, and they wriggled like ten fat, brown tadpoles.

In the midst of this recital Garcia senior appeared in the door with a warning.

"Conceal yourselves," he said, quickly. "Some of our neighbors are coming this way." Inez led her guests into the bedchamber, a bare room with a dirt floor, from the window of which they watched Juan go to meet a group of horsemen. Inez went out, too, and joined in the parley. Then, after a time, the riders galloped away.

When Alaire, having watched the party out of sight, turned from the window she found that Dave had collapsed upon a chair and was sleeping, his limbs relaxed, his body sagging.

"Poor fellow, he's done up," Father O'Malley exclaimed.

"Yes; he hasn't slept for days," she whispered. "Help me." With the assistance of Dolores they succeeded in lifting Dave to the bed, but he half roused himself. "Lie down, dear," Alaire told him. "Close your eyes for a few minutes. We're safe now."

"Somebody has to keep watch," he muttered, thickly, and tried to fight off his fatigue. But he was like a drunken man.

"I'm not sleepy; I'll stand guard," the priest volunteered, and, disregarding further protest, he helped Alaire remove Dave's coat.

Seeing that the bed was nothing more than a board platform covered with straw matting, Alaire folded the garment for a pillow; as she did so a handful of soiled, frayed letters spilled out upon the floor.

"Rest now, while you have a chance," she begged of her husband. "Just for a little while."

"All right," he agreed. "Call me in—an hour. Couldn't sleep—wasn't time." He shook off his weariness and smiled at his wife, while his eyes filmed with some emotion. "There is something I ought to tell you, but—I can't now—not now. Too sleepy." His head drooped again; she forced him back; he stretched himself out with a sigh, and was asleep almost instantly.

Alaire motioned the others out of the room, then stood looking down at the man into whose keeping she had given her life. As she looked her face became radiant. Dave was unkempt, unshaven, dirty, but to her he was of a godlike beauty, and the knowledge that he was hers to comfort and guard was strangely thrilling. Her love for Ed, even that first love of her girlhood, had been nothing like this. How could it have been like this? she asked herself. How could she have loved deeply when, at the time, her own nature lacked depth? Experience had broadened her, and suffering had uncovered depths in her being which nothing else had had the power to uncover. Stooping, she kissed Dave softly, then let her cheek rest against his. Her man! Her man! She found herself whispering the words.

Her eyes were wet, but there was a smile upon her lips when she gathered up the letters which had dropped from her husband's pocket. She wondered, with a little jealous twinge, who could be writing to him. It seemed to her that she owned him now, and that she could not bear to share him with any other. She studied the inscriptions with a frown, noticing as she did so that several of the envelopes were unopened—either Dave was careless about such things or else he had had no leisure in which to read his mail. One letter was longer and heavier than the rest, and its covering, sweat-stained and worn at the edges, came apart in her hands, exposing several pages of typewriting in the Spanish language. The opening words challenged her attention.

In the name of God, Amen,

Alaire read. Involuntarily her eye followed the next line:

Know all men by this public instrument that I, Maria Josefa Law, of this vicinity—

Alaire started. Who, she asked herself, was Maria Josefa Law? Dave had no sisters; no female relatives whatever, so far as she knew. She glanced at the sleeping man and then back at the writing.

—finding myself seriously ill in bed, but with sound judgment, full memory and understanding, believing in the ineffable mysteries of the Holy Trinity, three distinct persons in one God, in essence, and in the other mysteries acknowledged by our Mother, the Church—

So! This was a will—one of those queer Spanish documents of which Alaire had heard—but who was Maria Josefa Law? Alaire scanned the sheets curiously, and on the reverse side of the last one discovered a few lines, also in Spanish, but scrawled in pencil. They read:

My dear Nephew,—Here is the copy of your mother's will that I told you about. At the time of her death she was not possessed of the property mentioned herein, and so the original document was never filed for record, but came to me along with certain family possessions of small value. It seems to contain the information you desire.

Y'rs aff'ly,
Francisco Ramirez.

The will of Dave's mother! Then Maria Josefa Law was that poor woman regarding whose tragic end Judge Ellsworth had spoken so peculiarly. Alaire felt not a little curiosity to know more about the mother of the man whose name she had taken. Accordingly, after a moment of debate with herself, she sat down to translate the instrument. Surely Dave would not object if she occupied herself thus while he slept.

The document had evidently been drawn in the strictest form, doubtless by some local priest, for it ran:

First: I commend my soul to the Supreme Being who from nothing formed it, and my body I order returned to earth, and which, as soon as it shall become a corpse, it is my wish shall be shrouded with a blue habit in resemblance to those used by the monks of our Seraphic Father, St. Francis; to be interred with high mass, without pomp—

Alaire mused with a certain reverent pleasure that Dave's mother had been a devout woman.

Second: I declare to have, in the possession of my husband, Franklin Law, three horses, with splendid equipment of saddles and bridles, which are to be sold and the proceeds applied to masses for the benefit of my soul. I so declare, that it may appear.

Third: I declare to owe to Mrs. Guillelmo Perez about twenty dollars, to be ascertained by what she may have noted in her book of accounts. So I declare, that this debt may be paid as I have ordered.

Fourth: In just remuneration for the services of my cousin, Margarita Ramirez, I bequeath and donate a silver tray which weighs one hundred ounces, seven breeding cows, and four fine linen and lace tablecloths. So I declare, that it may appear.

Fifth: I bequeath to my adopted son, David, offspring of the unfortunate American woman who died in my house at Escovedo, the share of land—

Alaire re-read this paragraph wonderingly, then let the document fall into her lap. So Dave was an adopted son, and not actually the child of this woman, Maria Josefa Law. She wondered if he knew it, and, if so, why he hadn't told her? But, after all, what difference did it make who or what he was? He was hers to love and to comfort, hers to cherish and to serve.

For a long time she sat gazing at him tenderly; then she tiptoed out and delighted the naked Garcia baby by taking him in her arms and hugging him. Inez thought the beautiful *señora's* voice was like the music of birds.

It was growing dark when Dave was awakened by cool hands upon his face and by soft lips upon his. He opened his eyes to find Alaire bending over him.

"You must get up," she smiled. "It is nearly time to go, and Inez is cooking our supper."

He reached up and took her in his arms. She lay upon his breast, thrilling happily with her nearness to him, and they remained so for a while, whispering now and then, trying ineffectually to voice the thoughts that needed no expression.

"Why did you let me sleep so long?" he asked her, reproachfully.

"Oh, I've been napping there in that chair, where I could keep one eye on you. I'm terribly selfish; I can't bear to lose one minute." After a while she said: "I've made a discovery. Father O'Malley snores dreadfully! Juanito never heard anything like it, and it frightened him nearly to death. He says the Father must be a very fierce man to growl so loudly. He says, too, that he likes me much better than his mother."

It seemed to Dave that the bliss of this awakening and the sweet intimacy of this one moment more than rewarded him for all he had gone through, and paid him for any unhappiness the future might hold in store.

He felt called upon to tell Alaire the truth about himself; but with her in his arms he had no strength of purpose; her every endearment made him the more aware of his weakness. Again he asked himself when and how he could bear to tell her? Not now. Certainly not now when she was trembling under his caresses.

"I've been busy, too," she was saying. "I sent Juan to the village to learn the news, and it's not very nice. It's good we stopped here. He says Nuevo Pueblo has been destroyed, and the Federal forces are all moving south, away from the border. So our troubles aren't over yet. We must reach the river to-night."

"Yes, by all means."

"Juan is going with us as guide."

"You arranged everything while I snoozed, eh? I'm ashamed of myself."

Alaire nodded, then pretended to frown darkly. "You ought to be," she told him. "While you were asleep I read your mail and—"

"My mail?" Dave was puzzled.

"Exactly. Have you forgotten that your pockets were full of unopened letters?"

"Oh, those! They came just as I was leaving Jonesville, and I haven't thought of them since. You know, I haven't had my clothes off."

"I'm going to read all your love-letters," she told him, threateningly.

"Yes, and you're going to write all of them, too," he laughed.

But she shook a warning finger in his face. "I told you I'm a jealous person. I'm going to know all about you, past, present, and future. I—"

"Alaire! My darling!" he cried, and his face stiffened as if with pain.

Still in a joyous mood, she teased him. "You had better tremble. I've found you out, deceiver. I know who you really are."

"Who am I?"

"Don't you know?"

Dave shook his head.

"Really? Have you never read your mother's will?"

Law rose to his elbow, then swung his legs to the floor. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

For answer Alaire handed him the frayed envelope and its contents.

He examined it, and then said, heavily: "I see! I was expecting this. It seems I've been carrying it around all this time—"

"Why don't you read it?" she insisted. "There's light enough there by the window. I supposed you knew all about it or I wouldn't have joked with you."

He opened his lips to speak, but, seeing something in her eyes, he stepped to the window and read swiftly. A moment, and then he uttered a cry.

"Alaire!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Read this— My eyes— O God!"

Wonderingly she took the sheets from his shaking hands and read aloud the paragraph he indicated:

> Fifth: I bequeath to my adopted son, David, offspring of the unfortunate American woman who died in my house at Escovedo—

Again Dave cried out and knelt at Alaire's feet, his arms about her knees, his face buried in her dress. His shoulders were heaving and his whole body was racked with sobs.

Shocked, frightened, Alaire tried to raise him, but he encircled her in a tighter embrace.

"Dave! What is it? What have I done?" she implored. "Have I hurt you so?"

It was a long time before he could make known the significance of that paragraph, and when he finally managed to tell her about the terrible fear that had lain so heavily upon his soul it was in broken, choking words which showed his deep emotion. The story was out at last, however, and he stood over her transfigured.

Alaire lifted her arms and placed them upon his shoulders. "Were you going to give me up for that?—for a shadow?"

"Yes. I had made up my mind. I wouldn't have dared marry you last night, but—I never expected to see to-day's sun. I didn't think it would make much difference. It was more than a shadow, Alaire. It was real. I *was* mad—stark, staring mad—or in a fair way of becoming so. I suppose I brooded too much. Those violent spells, those wild moments I sometimes have, made me think it must be true. I dare say they are no more than temper, but they seemed to prove all that Ellsworth suspected."

"You must have thought me a very cowardly woman," she told him. "It wouldn't have made the slightest difference to me, Dave. We would have met it together when it came, just as we'll meet everything now—you and I, together."

"My wife!" He laid his lips against her hair.

They were standing beside the window, speechless, oblivious to all except their great love, when Dolores entered to tell them that supper was ready and that the horses were saddled.

XXXII

THE DAWN

JUAN GARCIA proved to be a good guide, and he saved the refugees many miles on their road to the Rio Grande. But every farm and every village was a menace, and at first they were forced to make numerous détours. As the night grew older, however, they rode a straighter course, urging their horses to the limit, hoping against hope to reach the border before daylight overtook them. This they might have done had it not been for Father O'Malley and Dolores, who were unused to the saddle and unable to maintain the pace Juan set for them.

About midnight the party stopped on the crest of a flinty ridge to give their horses breath and to estimate their progress. The night was fine and clear; outlined against the sky were the stalks of countless sotol-plants standing slim and bare, like the upright lances of an army at rest; ahead the road meandered across a mesa, covered with grama grass and black, formless blots of shrubbery.

Father O'Malley groaned and shifted his weight. "Juan tells me we'll never reach Romero by morning, at this rate," he said; and Dave was forced to agree. "I think you and he and Alaire had better go on and leave Dolores and me to follow as best we can."

Dolores plaintively seconded this suggestion. "I would rather be burned at the stake than suffer these agonies," she confessed. "My bones are broken. The devil is in this horse." She began to weep softly. "Go, *señora*. Save yourself! It is my accursed fat stomach that hinders me. Tell Benito that I perished breathing his name, and see to it, when he remarries, that he retains none of my treasures."

Alaire reassured her by saying: "We won't leave you. Be brave and make the best of it."

"Yes, grit your teeth and hold on," Dave echoed. "We'll manage to make it somehow."

But progress was far slower than it should have been, and the elder woman continued to lag behind, voicing her distress in groans and lamentations. The priest, who was made of sterner stuff, did his best to bear his tortures cheerfully.

In spite of their efforts the first rosy heralds of dawn discovered them still a long way from the river and just entering a more thickly settled country. Daylight came swiftly, and Juan finally gave them warning.

"We can't go on; the danger is too great," he told them. "If the soldiers are still in Romero, what then?"

"Have you no friends hereabouts who would take us in?" Dave inquired.

The Mexican shook his head.

Dave considered for a moment. "You must hide here," he told his companions, "while I ride on to Romero and see what can be done. I suspect Blanco's troops have left, and in that case everything will be all right."

"Suppose they haven't?" Alaire inquired. All night she had been in the lightest of moods, and had steadily refused to take their perils seriously. Now her smile chased the frown from her husband's face.

"Well, perhaps I'll have breakfast with them," he laughed.

"Silly. I won't let you go," she told him, firmly; and, reading the expression in her face, he felt a dizzy wonder. "We'll find a nice secluded spot; then we'll sit down and wait for night to come. We'll pretend we're having a picnic."

Dolores sighed at the suggestion. "That would be heaven, but there can be no sitting down for me."

Garcia, who had been standing in his stirrups scanning the long, flat road ahead, spoke sharply: "*Caramba!* Here come those very soldiers now! See!"

Far away, but evidently approaching at a smart gait, was a body of mounted men. After one look at them Dave cried:

"Into the brush, quick!" He hurried his companions ahead of him, and when they had gone perhaps a hundred yards from the road he took Juan's Winchester, saying: "Ride in a little way farther and wait. I'm going back. If you hear me shoot, break for the river. Ride hard and keep under cover as much as possible." Before they could remonstrate he had wheeled Montrosa and was gone.

This was luck, he told himself. Ten miles more and they would have been safe, for the Rio Grande is not a difficult river either to ford or to swim. He dismounted and made his way on foot to a point where he could command a view, but he had barely established himself when he found Alaire at his side.

"Go back," he told her. But she would not, and so they waited together.

There were perhaps a dozen men in the approaching squad, and Dave saw that they were heavily accoutred. They rode fast, too, and at their head galloped a large man under a wide-brimmed felt hat. It soon became evident that the soldiers were not uniformed. Therefore, Dave reasoned, they were not Federals, but more probably some Rebel scouting band from the south, and yet— He rubbed his eyes and stared again.

Dave pressed forward eagerly, incredulously; the next instant he had broken cover with a shout. Alaire was at his side, clapping her hands and laughing with excitement.

The cavalcade halted; the big man tumbled from his saddle and came straddling through the high grass, waving his hat and yelling.

"Blaze! You old scoundrel!" Dave cried, and seized one of the ranchman's palms while Alaire shook the other.

"Say! We're right glad to see you-all," Jones exclaimed. "We reckoned you might be havin' a sort of unpleasantness with Longorio, so we organized up and came to get you."

The other horsemen were crowding close now, and their greetings were noisy. There were the two Guzman boys, Benito Gonzales, Phil Strange, and a number of Jonesville's younger and more adventurous citizens.

In the midst of the tumult Benito inquired for his wife, and Dave relieved his anxiety by calling Dolores and Father O'Malley. Then, in answer to the questions showered upon him, he swiftly sketched the story of Alaire's rescue and their flight from La Feria.

When he had finished Blaze Jones drew a deep breath. "We're mighty glad you got out safe, but you've kicked the legs from under one of my pet ambitions. I sure had planned to nail Longorio's hide on my barn door. Yes, and you've taken the bread out of the mouths of the space writers and sob sisters from here to Hudson's Bay. Miz Austin, your picture's in every newspaper in the country, and, believe me, it's the worst atrocity of the war."

"War!" Father O'Malley had joined the group now, and he asked, "Has war been declared?"

"Not yet, but we've got hopes." To Alaire Blaze explained: "Ellsworth's in Washington, wavin' the Stars and Stripes and singin' battle hymns, but I reckon the government figures that the original of those newspaper pictures would be safe anywhere. Well, we've got our own ideas in Jonesville, so some of us assembled ourselves and declared war on our own hook. These gentlemen"—

Blaze waved his hand proudly at his neighbors—"constitute the Jonesville Guards, the finest body of American men that has invaded Mexican soil since me and Dave went after Ricardo Guzman's remains. Blamed if I ain't sorry you sidetracked our expedition."

It was evident, from the words of the others, that the Jonesville Guards were indeed quite as heedless of international complications as was their commander. One and all were highly incensed at Longorio's perfidy, and, had Alaire suggested such a thing, it was patent that they would have ridden on to La Feria and exacted a reckoning from him.

Such proof of friendship affected her deeply, and it was not until they were all under way back toward Romero that she felt she had made her appreciation fully known. When she reflected that these men were some of the very neighbors whom she had shunned and slighted, and whose honest interest she had so habitually misconstrued all these years, it seemed very strange that they should feel the least concern over her. It gave her a new appreciation of their chivalry and their worth; it filled her with a humble desire to know them better and to strengthen herself in their regard. Then, too, the esteem in which they held Dave—her husband—gratified her intensely. It made no more difference to them than to her that he was a poor man, a man without authority or position; they evidently saw and loved in him the qualities which she saw and loved. And that was as it should be.

They were gentle and considerate men, too, as she discovered when they told her, bit by bit, what had happened during her absence. She learned, much to her relief, that Ed's funeral had been held, and that all the distressing details of the inquiry had been attended to. José Sanchez, it appeared, had confessed freely. Although her new friends made plain their indignation at the manner of Ed's taking off, they likewise let her know that they considered his death only a slight loss, either to her or to the community. Not one of them pretended it was anything except a blessing.

The journey drew to an end very quickly. Romero, deserted now by its garrison, stirred and stared sleepily at the invaders, but concerned itself with their presence no more than to wonder why they laughed and talked so spiritedly. Plainly, these *Gringos* were a barbarous race of people, what with their rushing here and there, and with their loud, senseless laughter. God had wisely placed them beyond the Rio Grande, said the citizens of Romero.

The crossing was made; Alaire found herself in Texas once again, and it seemed to her that the sun had never been so bright, the air so clear, the sky so high, the world so smiling, as here and now. The men who had ridden forth to seek her were smiling, too, and they were shaking her hands and congratulating her. Even the Guzman boys, who were shy in the presence of American ladies, were wishing her the best of fortune and the greatest of happiness.

Blaze Jones was the last to leave. With especial emphasis upon her name, he said: "Miz Austin, Paloma and me would like to have you come to our house and stay until you feel like goin' back to Las Palmas."

When Alaire declined with moistened eyes, explaining that she could not well accept his invitation, he signified his understanding.

"We're goin' to see a lot of you, just the same," he promised her, "'cause we feel as if you sort of belonged to us. There's a lot of good people in this part of Texas, and them that ain't so good God and the Rangers is slowly weedin' out. We don't always know the ones we like best until something happens to 'em, but if you'd heard the prayers the folks of Jonesville have been sayin' lately you'd know you was our favorite." Then, with a meaning twinkle in his eye, he told her, gravely: "It seems a pity that I ain't younger and better-lookin'. I would sure cut short your grief." Then he raised his hat and rode away, chuckling.

Alaire turned to Dave in dismay. "He knows!" she cried.

"I'm afraid they all know. But don't worry; they'll respect our wishes."

Father O'Malley had ridden on ahead with Benito and Dolores; Dave and Alaire followed leisurely. Now that the moment of their parting was at hand, they lingered by the way, delaying it as long as possible, feeling a natural constraint at what was in their minds.

"How long—will it be?" he asked her, finally. "How long before I can really have you for my own?"

Alaire smiled into his eyes. "Not long. But you'll be patient, won't you, dear?"

He took her hand in his, and they rode on silently, a song in the heart of each of them.

THE END

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